Heavy like Velvet, Weightless like Silk
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Heavy like Velvet, Weightless like Silk

by run_mello

Summary

"I have an idea," Dazai trills, as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "why don't *I* model for you?"

Chuuya averts his gaze from the magnetic pull of Dazai's eyes and stares into the black abyss of his coffee instead. Why is he cursed with a genius best friend who's always eager to think up perfect solutions? In this case, perfectly *disastrous*. There's no way Chuuya is going to be able to look at Dazai in lingerie on a daily basis and not internally combust from the heavy burden of unrequited love and… uh, well, horniness.

OR: Chuuya is a designer who needs a fitting model. Dazai wants to be a model. Seemingly a perfect match, but they're desperately in love and very awkward about it, so a lot of chaos and misunderstandings ensue.

Russian translation by Kiuochi

Notes

Dear Sasa,

Thank you for making fandom such a fun and wonderful experience. When you said "Dazai in lingerie," I said, "yes, absolutely," and then it took me like 6 months to do anything about it but FINALLY the first chapter is ready.
I hope you enjoy this very chaotic fic 💕 💖

A huge thanks to Amai for answering all my questions about the fashion industry and design 🩶 💕 💗 💖

Chapter 1: It Starts

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Do not wait for life to be picturesque, but try and see life under picturesque conditions. These conditions you can create for yourself in your studio, for they are merely conditions of light. In nature, you must wait for them, watch for them, choose them; and, if you wait and watch, come they will.

- Oscar Wilde

It starts, as many things do, with the Head of Design, Mori Ougai, sauntering into Chuuya's office (well, shared office - Chuuya isn't high enough on the payroll to have his own private workspace. He may as well though, because his dear superior, the king of haute goth, senior designer Ryunosuke Akutagawa, is an intense hyper-focus-beast-mode designer who sort of becomes one with his workflow. He seems to value autonomy a lot, and he lets Chuuya do pretty much whatever he wants. Chuuya likes him a lot).

"Ryu, darling." Mori flashes a blinding smile in Akutagawa's general direction as he sweeps into the room, hands crossed behind his back. His eyes roam Akutagawa's half of the studio, taking in the designs-in-progress, which hang from the mannequins; dark tones, clear silhouettes, narrow waists, voluminous skirt, corsets and long coat-and-shirt combos. There's an overflow of mesh, brocade and taffeta; a Meiji era inspired layered elegance that's perfectly juxtaposed against the haunting, verging on morbid, skull prints that stretch across many of the fabrics. "Dear me. Ryu, my precious pet, were you not present at the meeting last week where our trend researchers presented their plan for the spring collection. A romantic pastel look, wasn't it? This all looks very dark and frilly to me."

Akutagawa doesn't raise his gaze, too busy sewing a vintage-looking lace trim into a collar, but he does acknowledge the question with a simple monotone, "yes," and then grunts something about pastels being bad for his asthma.

It's not much of an explanation, and it's even less of a promise to

accommodate spring fashion trends, but Mori doesn't seem all too bothered if the pleasant (but phoney) smile that's still stuck on his face is any indication.

Turning his head, he levels Chuuya with the bloodthirsty look of a particularly voracious predator. "Chuuya-kun, sweetheart," he purrs, it sounds ominous, and the addition of the impersonal pet name only adds a more foreboding ring to the greeting.

Chuuya bows. As one does. "Good afternoon, sir."

"We're expanding into the lingerie market," Mori announces as he steeples his finger in front of his chest. He looks excited, and Chuuya doesn't know why this excitement is being thrown his way, but he nods sagely all the same. As a true aesthete and passionate designer who lives for l'art pour l'art, Chuuya isn't particularly interested in the business aspects of fashion, but he knows that the loungewear and lingerie market is a booming and lucrative industry. "That's brilliant."

"Glad you think so, I'm promoting you to senior designer of the lingerie team."

Chuuya's head suddenly feels light, thoughts taking flight as his ability to make sense of things drains out of his ears and seeps into the ether. He can't possibly have heard Mori right. "You… what?"

"Don't be slow, Chuuya-kun."

"But I'm... I specialise in ready-to-wear and traditional pattern design. I don't know anything about lingerie."

Mori raises an eyebrow into a perfect arch. "That's not how you sell yourself, love."

Chuuya suppresses a scoff. He has no desire to over-promote his capabilities with dazzling jazz hands when he knows that his hard-earned talent speaks for itself... Talent doesn't necessarily make up for lack of experience though. "I've just never worked with lingerie before, is all I'm saying."

"You have a good eye for detail, colour-combination and fit. Your designs are that perfect combination of elegant and playful and that's exactly the look I'm envisioning for our first collection. Are you up for it or not? because if not, I'm sure I can find someone else."

Oh no, Chuuya doesn't like the sound of that. The prospect of diving

into lingerie design seems a little daunting, but Chuuya likes new challenges, and he's certainly not about to give his promotion away. “No, I'm in.”

Mori claps his hands together. Loudly. “Very well.” He spins on his heel, long red silk scarf swirling around him like a bat's wings as he floats along. “Drop by my office later so we can discuss the details. You start tomorrow,” he adds, waving a hand over his shoulder in adieu.

And then he’s gone, vanished with the understated glitz of a sly cat, slinking out unnoticed.

“What just happened?” Chuuya leans on his desk. He slides his hand across the smooth ebony, reaching for one of the many pieces of scrap fabric that always lies around. Silk-velvet. Chuuya’s favourite near-impossible-to-work-with textile. He picks it up and kneads it in his hand. Soft. Calming.

Akutagawa's voice cuts through Chuuya’s peaceful little moment. “You just got promoted, and your enthusiasm is inspiring.”

“Oi! I’m in shock. I’ll show you enthused, just give me a second.”

One second turns into many seconds, and Chuuya still can’t quite make sense of the situation.

Time slows down, but the ginormous wall-clock ticks away merrily, gold lacquer pendulum swinging from side to side completely oblivious to the subjective sense of time.

Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The sound seems to get harsher with every passing second, ringing inside Chuuya's skull as the world around him turns up its saturation.

Too loud.

The sun beats in through the large floor to ceiling windows, sheer paper yarn roller blinds dividing the light into artistic stripes.

Too bright.

Closing his eyes, just for a second, Chuuya regains his cool, calm and collected aura. He tightens his grip on the smooth piece of velvet; his trusted little anchor.

“You’re probably one of the youngest designers to receive the senior title,” Akutagawa comments in a soft but somehow still very intense monotone.

After a deep inhale, Chuuya blinks his eyes open. Akutagawa is still hunched over, needle in hand and eyes trained on the collar he’s working on when he says, “it’s quite a remarkable achievement, you should be proud of yourself.”

“I *know*. That’s why I need a bit of time to process it. My whole career has been one miracle after the other.”

“Miracle? That’s very dramatic. Good to see you’re back to normal.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. If he wants to think of his accomplishments as self-manufactured miracles, no one can stop him. He’s allowed a little grandiosity. “I remember when I got the internship here,” Chuuya starts, his voice turning all mushy with nostalgia for the dearly remembered, recent-gone past, “that in itself was big. Mori Designs doesn’t usually take interns. And then, *miraculously,* I was offered a permanent position after the internship.”

A strange huffing sound escapes Akutagawa’s concentration-pursed lips as he sews the last stitch, finishing fastening the trim to the collar. Feisty and practical as he is in his workflow, he then breaks the thread with his teeth and shoves the needle into one of the many spools of thread that lay scattered around on the table in front of him. He lifts his head, a quizzical look on his face as he meets Chuuya’s eyes. “Why are you talking about all this like it happened a long time ago and I don’t already know?”

Chuuya ignores the question in favour of continuing recounting the grand narrative of his life. “And now. Less than a year later. I’m a senior designer for one of the most valuable, popular, exclusive luxury brands in the world!”

“Yes. Very impressive,” Akutagawa says, and Chuuya has no doubts that his statement is as sincere as his antagonism towards pastels, but somehow he manages to sound completely and utterly unimpressed.

The flat response makes confetti and bubbles of laughter rise through Chuuya’s chest. “Isn’t it?” He trills, a bit of heat rising to his cheeks, and feeling a little unhinged he adds an exaggerated wink.

But then he *realises*. “Wait. Hold on. You’re young too. How the f- err, how on earth did *you* manage to climb the ladder so fast?”

“No miracles were involved.” Akutagawa reaches across the table for a felt-tip pen and a block of paper, head dipping and the bleached roots of his hair curtaining his face as he sets about sketching another intricate design. “Got the job because my boyfriend’s dad is one of Mori Designs’ biggest investors.”

“Oh,” Chuuya says, not really knowing what else to say. He resents nepotism among the rich and powerful with every fibre in his heart - the concept that sparkly trust fund babies with silver spoons coming out of their orifices are somehow more deserving of good things than those street urchins, like Chuuya, who have to rely on nothing but their own talent, charm and determination to get ahead in life, makes him feel like a human pincushion, skin stretched tight and prickling with bitterness.

Still, even a broken clock is correct twice a day, and the grotesquely unfair system *is* wholly justified in providing Akutagawa opportunities and privileges. He’s as skilled, artistic, and creative as he’s hard-working; his title is fully deserved.

So Chuuya will be civil and not get on a soapbox (although he could vent for hours about the topic if he wanted to). Instead, he says, “well I’m happy that faith brought us together. I Like working with you and-”

“How sentimental,” Akutagawa sneers.

And once again Akutagawa’s dazzling personality makes Chuuya dissolve into a fit of giggles.

Chuuya is delighted with his new position. Truly. This lingerie adventure is going to be his time to shine, and he’s proud of himself, excited, and all that good stuff. It’s grand... But in the surprising turn of events that have landed Chuuya a promotion also lies a bit of an issue.

Because while Chuuya *does* have a good eye for fit (It’s something he prides himself on) he doesn’t have a particularly good sense of how *lingerie* is supposed to fit.

His skin is hypersensitive and will turn into an itching inferno if he as much as considers wearing underwear that isn’t made of only the highest quality bamboo or cotton.

Chuuya supposes that he could disregard his bitchy hypersensitivities and try on some lingerie, but he doesn't think it will help much. He's a tactile-visual learner, and he can't really get a good 360-degree view and feel of himself in lingerie, having his head and arms attached to his body and all.

The idea of putting on lingerie and having a mirror session while he runs his hands up and down himself also just seems very autoerotically awkward. He's pretty sure he won't be able to pull that particular stunt off. He can't split his focus enough to be both the elegant model, the attentive designer and his hyper-reflective self without getting into very uncomfortable, existential, identity-crises territory.

In conclusion, he desperately needs a fitting model.

And well, that in itself isn't a problem. Mori Designs has contracts with plenty of model agencies, but lingerie design is a new venue for Chuuya, and it's not just that he has to ask a model to try it on to test the fit, it's that he needs someone to actually model lingerie for him so he can get intimately familiar with the sensuous functionality of lingerie; observe the folds and lines, study the way his chosen fabrics drape over the landscape of a real human body - and *that* - asking someone to model like that. To let Chuuya get close, rake his eyes up and down every curve, maybe even *touch;* feel the texture of fishnets and satins against skin - well that's just unbefitting. And definitely bordering on creepy. And unprofessional.

Just the thought has a clammy shiver capsizing Chuuya's body. With a muffled groan he takes off his favourite fashion accessory - his beloved custom-made hat from Maison Michel in Paris - and runs a hand through his hair. A tingling sensation spreads through his scalp and down his neck as he pulls lightly at the roots, pacifying the discomfort of his thoughts.

He's many things, but he's not an unprofessional creep who insists on keeping underpaid models in an underheated room for hours and hours while they're being overexposed to his prying eyes and hands.

Nope, Chuuya is a gentleman and a solution-focused one at that. He'll have to do with a mannequin, and he'll make that work. Somehow.

With punctilious grace but little passion, Chuuya grabs the mannequin's unrealistically tiny waist and spins it around, beholding

it with a cursory eye. It, unfortunately, but very predictably, lacks the grace of a human body. For one, it doesn't fucking move, and Chuuya needs to see how different textiles and styles wove and drape over a body-in-motion, damn it.

The next big problem is the mannequin's strong and heavy-duty canvas covering. While it's nice and rough against Chuuya's fingertips when he slides a rather basic looking test-piece of a chemise over its shoulders, it's also cold and inanimate.

"No. No, no, no -- this is not working." Chuuya's nose scrunches as he mutters to himself (because free-spirited, nonconformist, mildly eccentric creatives talk to themselves and their art - it's part of the lifestyle). "You know," he continues, levelling the mannequin with a judgemental glower, "I tried to stay positive and give you a chance and all that, but you suck and I really fucking need a *real* fitting model."

A subtle vibrating buzz rips through the silence of the studio, and semi-automatically, Chuuya's hand gravitates towards the inner pocket of his blazer, fishes out his phone.

There's a text message notification from Dazai, and as Chuuya opens it, a string of messages arrive in quick succession. They get progressively more petulant as Dazai complains about his ex lab partner's eldritch existence:

"Hi, Chu <3 How are you? I'm not well because Fyodor is looking at me and I don't like it."

"I think he's still mad that I dropped him for Yosano."

"Well, that's what he gets when he tries to steal my lab data and present it as his own."

"He's still looking."

"Ugh. Why won't he leave me alone? I've tried everything: Ignoring him, looking back, sending him death threats - but he just won't stop. Gross."

"Chuuuuuuuuuuyaaaaaa please come save me. I can't focus on Oda-sensei's wondrous lecture on exocytosis in astrocytes at all when Fyodor is being such a distracting little rat-shit."

"He's now licking the tip of his pen while looking directly at me, and I'm scared for my life. Why is he like this? Also, can you drop by the shops on

the way home and buy me canned crab? Pretty please?"

Despite his misery, Chuuya is helpless to find Dazai's histrionic streak anything but so endearing that it makes him chuckle into his sleeve as he re-reads the messages.

Dazai can turn trivial grievances and misfortunes into comical dramas, and info-dumps about neurotransmitters (or whatever it is he's studying) into pure poetry. Of course, Dazai's academic soliloquies never make much sense to Chuuya, but he will still listen uncritically simply because he treasures every bit of nonsense that Dazai brings to life in his smooth, tingling, silvery voice.

Chuuya might not be on good terms with the mannequin, but he feels like leaning on *something*, so he wraps an arm around it, fingers instinctively finding one of the chemise's silky spaghetti straps and twirling around it. The material is delicate and sleek; that mind-blowing combination of innocent and delectable - it sort of reminds him a bit of Dazai.

But then again, loving Dazai is a lot more bristling than that. More like handling crushed velvet: Sometimes it's soft and sweet. Sometimes Chuuya accidentally runs a finger against the grain of the irregular moiré-aspect-fabric and freezes up as his tactile system goes haywire; as an unnerving sensation extending like icky tendrils through his body, spreads from his digits and up his arms, coils around his spine, fries his poor brain.

Sighing, he shoots a quick message to Dazai, validating his misery at Fyodor's utter barbarity and reminding him that he can't sustain himself on just canned food but promising to buy fresh crab cakes.

For the fun of appearing unaffected, he doesn't make a show of delivering the big news - simply adding a subtle little, *"by the way, guess who got promoted to senior lingerie designer,"* as a post scriptum.

He slips his phones back into his chest pocket where it settles; a heavy wall for his heart to beat against. Quite like his infatuation with Dazai. How grossly symbolic.

It serves as a reminder to exercise will power and not succumb to the self-pity vortex.

Chuuya will be strong and take care of this on his own just to prove a point. He won't tell Dazai about his fitting model plight, won't give in to the alluring impulse to vent. Whining won't fix anything. Sure,

Dazai is an excellent listener - enables Chuuya's rage and pettiness to transform the spiral of unmanageable shit feelings into manageable shit feelings. But…

… But he needs to stop relying so much on Dazai to manage his moods. Because this dumb unrequited crush he's harbouring for Dazai has started snow-balling out of control and that's one thing that he *can't* ask Dazai to help him with.

Clenching the mannequin's shoulder, Chuuya tries to dampen the torrent of acidity that rushes through him at the thought, an unwelcome meltdown sneaking up on him from the core of his useless desires. He can't allow himself to fall into ruminations on his personal problems when he also has an occupational crisis to deal with. Shit gets too overwhelming.

Why can't it just be easy? This is supposed to be his time to shine.

A little hum from Chuuya's pocket signals the arrival of another text message. He pulls out his phone again, squinting at the very confusing concoction of emojis that Dazai has sent him. It's not easy to decipher the meaning, but Chuuya concludes that it's Dazai's coded-language way of saying 'congratulations'.

And Chuuya is an expert where Dazai is concerned, so of course, his theory is confirmed when another message arrives: *"Chu!!!! I'm so proud of you. That's amazing. You're a star‿‿‿ we are having a celebration later!!!"*

Okay, so maybe Chuuya can't help himself. Maybe he's a bit of a sucker for praise (specifically when it comes from Dazai). Maybe that's why his head is floating somewhere above his body. High and happy.

Before Chuuya has the chance to wipe-off his dopey smile and lodge his consciousness back into his body enough to compose a cool and collected response, Dazai writes: *"And Lingerie? That's wonderful! I love lingerie!"*

Wait. What?

The air in Chuuya's lungs inflates, then pushes out on a wheeze as he gawks with unblinking shock into the eye-strainingly-bright-even-on-the-lowest-brightness-setting phone screen.

Dazai wears lingerie?

Images of off-white lace corsets, stretching around a narrow bandaged waist flood Chuuya's mind, kicking up a fluttering warmth in his chest.

How magnificent. How dreadful. Everything Chuuya wants and everything he can't permit himself to lust for under any circumstance. "Don't think about Dazai in lingerie, don't think about Dazai in lingerie, don't think about Dazai in lingerie," he chants to himself, in a sped-up mumble.

But a warning never stopped his thoughts from going where they want - which is to *legs*. Legs, legs, legs - Dazai's endless legs clad in fine-spun peach-coloured stockings, dainty ribbon garters winding around his squishy thighs.

FUCK. ABORT.

Chuuya turns to violence as his first resort, slapping his wrist. *Hard.* It stings and throbs, but it also works - it distracts him from the much more intolerable pain of fantasizing about what he can't have.

♡♡♡

"Is something wrong?" Dazai asks, looking at Chuuya over his cup, steam misting up his glasses.

Chuuya grunts. A lot of things are wrong. Right now, what gets to Chuuya the most though, is the fact that Dazai has the audacity to look as shamelessly kissable as he does when Chuuya isn't allowed to kiss him.

Unfair. So unfair.

Maybe he should just give up and confess his feelings to Dazai. Wouldn't that be romantic? And then they could throw themselves at each other, make out on the kitchen table, whisper sweet nothings into each other's ears; declare their undying love, and- "I really need a fitting model for my lingerie gig," he mumbles, impulse control slipping and spitting out one meant-to-be-secret in exchange for keeping the unspeakable secret crush buried and confined deep inside Chuuya's yearning heart.

Big oops, but oh well, he supposes he can only have so many skeletons in his closet before it gets crowded in there and the biggest, oldest, most haunted ones start kicking the newcomers out.

Dazai's eyes light up, and that's a disarmingly charming look on him... but it's also very often a bad sign. He claps his hands with fanfare, the loud snap making Chuuya's eyes twitch and it's sort of uncanny how much Dazai's body language reminds Chuuya of his dear boss sometimes. Weird.

"I have an idea," Dazai trills, as he pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose, "why don't *I* model for you?"

Chuuya nearly chokes on his coffee and has to cough clumsily a couple of times before he regains his composure. He looks accusingly at Dazai, hoping his scowl communicates that he'd appreciate it if Dazai would be so kind as to drop the topic.

Of course, it doesn't work. Dazai wouldn't know a warning if it slapped him in the face - or he would, he just wouldn't care to heed it.

"Did you hear me, Chuuya?" Dazai tilts his head the way he does when he wants something, all artificial innocence and demureness.

Utterly irresistible. Which is why Chuuya has to look away. He averts his gaze from the magnetic pull of Dazai's eyes and stares into the black abyss of his coffee instead.

Why is he cursed with a genius best friend who's always eager to think up perfect solutions? In this case, perfectly *disastrous*.

There's no way Chuuya is going to be able to look at Dazai in lingerie on a daily basis and not internally combust from the heavy burden of unrequited love and… uh, well, horniness.

Dazai waves a hand, flapping it around like a butterfly in Chuuya's peripheral line of vision, impossible to not look at - as alluring as everything else about Dazai from his big amber eyes to his sharp mind to his questionable fashion sense (why is he wearing a pink sweater vest? And why the fuck is he matching it with a gemstone embellished bolo tie? Chuuya has not approved that).

"Helloooo. Earth to Chu-chu," Dazai sings, that bewitching voice of his. Devastating is what it is - like little silverbells that trickle down Chuuya's spine and set his nerves alight, wrestle a knife in between his ribs and spears his already-bleeding heart.

A shiver threatens to bolt through Chuuya's body, but he does his utmost to suppress it. He can't let himself suffer the indignity of

autonomic reaction because Dazai's an attentive little devil who *always* notices those types of bodily responses, and like a true researcher, he tears them apart; analyses them to smithereens.

And Chuuya knows his defences - his miserable attempts to pretend he's not a lovelorn idiot - would crumble under the scrutiny of the scientific method. No, he won't give Dazai reasons to suspect anything.

Clutching his cup, he looks back at Dazai, fixing his eyes on the bridge of Dazai's nose - avoiding his big bottomless eyes because those are dangerous. *"What?"* he drips.

"Did Chuuya not sleep well? He's particularly slow and moody today," Dazai lifts a finger and points it at himself, "*I*," slowly he angles his hand to point at Chuuya, "should model for *you*." he leans forward in his seat until his finger lightly boops Chuuya's nose.

Chuuya follows the motion with his eyes until they cross and he starts to feel dizzy. Yeah..." he says because he has to say something or it will seem weird… it's probably weird already.

Dropping his hand and sitting back in his chair, Dazai's face lights up like a whole field of sunflowers and Chuuya almost feels bad about having to shoot him down. He braces his elbows on the table, the very picture of calm. "It's a brilliant idea, Dazai, it really is - but it won't work. I'm sorry."

Dazai pouts. He's clearly putting on a show, pulling out that beguiling dewy-eyed look, which means that he's about to get his way with charm. Fucking coercive. Chuuya wishes he could stop loving him so he could hate him.

That's not on the table though, Chuuya, for all his talents, can't turn his feelings off like that.

Dazai bats his unfairly long lashes. "Why, Chuuya? Are you telling me I'm not pretty enough to be a model?"

"No, but your measurements aren't standard," Chuuya asserts with all the confidence he can muster, "you're too tall and too skinny, you beanpole." (Yes, it's an interesting way of saying 'you're the most beautiful person I've ever laid my eyes upon', but Chuuya is creative with language like that.)

Dazai's pout intensifies. With a single chopstick, he pokes at his

breakfast - a breakfast that has barely been touched. “But what if I need a part-time job? What if I won't be able to pay the rent if I don't find one? Then we’d have to move out and look for something smaller. I don’t want to do that. I like our home.”

Our home. Doesn’t that sound sweet? Chuuya likes their home too. Mainly because it’s something he shares with Dazai, but also because it’s just objectively nice; spacious, stylish and centrally located.

It’s ridiculously luxurious for a recent design graduate and a university student. The only way they’re able to afford it is because they're *not* - the apartment is a gift from Dazai’s rich uncle, a mysterious character who Chuuya has never had the pleasure of meeting and who Dazai never mentions unless pressed. And Chuuya rarely presses because Dazai doesn't respond well to pressure - for all he pretends that nothing ever gets to him, he is a sensitive soul under the layers of bandages.

Chuuya purses his lips as his hand drops, brushing his thigh. “Rent? I was under the impression that the apartment was already paid-off and your uncle took care of the utility bills?”

“Well, yes. I totally forgot about that.”

That’s most definitely a lie, but Dazai just shrugs. So shameless; the way he doesn't seem the least abashed by being caught redhanded in his buffoonery. And, of course, he just continues, “but what if I wanted a part-time job, so I had some extra spending money? What if I wanted to buy some chic lingerie for myself?”

Annoying. Chuuya finds Dazai and his rambling arguments so annoying. And endearing.

He shoots Dazai a deadpan look, and he's going to be a bit confrontational - to *press* - because Dazai is being ridiculous. “If money is short, you could always ask your uncle for-”

“I’d rather not.”

Right. Of course not. Why ask your multimillionaire uncle for a little extra pocket money, when you can choose to suffer instead. Chuuya wrinkles his nose but doesn’t comment further.

Curiosity itches at the back of his brain the way it always does when Dazai’s mysterious past is brought up; tickles with the need to know why Dazai’s mood switches into temperamental teenager mode

whenever conversation veers towards the man who raised him. But it's not his business to pry into Dazai's family relations - he trusts Dazai to tell that story once he's ready. "Well, then you can borrow from me."

"I don't want to," Dazai grumbles, lip protruding in a pout, and the whole thing would be so much more convincing if Chuuya believed that Dazai cared about money or the ethics of spending it.

All this is just hot air that Dazai blows out because his beautiful, addictive, all-consuming, genius mind is overheating from this sudden I-will-literally-perish-if-I-don't-fulfil-my-potential-as-lingerie-model fixation of his.

He tries to distract Dazai with real and grounded arguments; "you should focus on your studies and not a dumb part-time job you don't care about."

Dazai pokes his innocent breakfast even harder. There's a menacing frown on his face - the kind of frown he wears when he's hell-bent on getting his way. "I *want* to model for you," he says, voice laced with the most intense sincerity. While Dazai's impromptu modelling-mania seems random, it's undeniably real.

"Right," Chuuya acknowledges, wanting to validate the truthfulness of Dazai's desires, even if he's not about to fulfill them.

"Is that a yes? You'll let me be your muse?"

"Model," Chuuya clarifies.

Dazai waves his hand as though it's an unimportant point of semantics. "Yes, yes. Model, me as your model. Say yes," he wheedles - definitely in blackmail mode, everything about him sleek and smooth. Like *velvet*.

Chuuya bristles. He wants to say yes, but he can't. He cares too much about self-preservation to accept such an offer. It could never work - just the *thought* of Dazai in lingerie has already cost Chuuya one meltdown, he doesn't trust his yearning heart to survive an encounter with the real thing.

He doesn't know how to say no, though. So he does the only thing he can do and says nothing. He plunks a sugar cube into his coffee and stirs it with a teaspoon.

"Since when do you drink sugar in your coffee?" Dazai asks, suspicion

laden in his eyes.

Chuuya blinks. Right. That's not something he does.

Where's the fucking alcohol? He's so tempted to completely space out; to lose himself in a daydream about the sweet relief of some fine wine, but Dazai drags him out of the fantasy and right back into reality with a half-concerned, half-amused sounding, "are you okay, Chuuya?"

Chuuya nods. "Perfectly fine. Sugar is good for your health. Isn't that what you always tell me?" It sounds incredibly stupid to his own ears. He covers up the faux-pas by stirring his coffee a little harder before taking a generous sip - burning his tongue in the process.

A soft smile blooms on Dazai's face. "Ah, so you finally agree that I'm always right-"

"No."

"-and that I should model for you," Dazai continues, reaching across the table to grab Chuuya's hand, squeezing it gently. "Right?"

"Uh, no? That's -- *no*." Kind of a little lost for words, Chuuya takes to shaking his head. It gives him more of a headache than he already has, but Dazai's face falls, so it seems to do the trick in terms of getting the point across.

"I really am sorry," Chuuya says, because he *is.* He would love to live in a perfect alternative universe where he could be blessed by the no-doubt heavenly view of Dazai wearing tailored lingerie. But the cruel reality of things is that Chuuya's unrequited crush is growing day by day; his heart is an aching gaping wound and he *won't* let Dazai do the catwalk all over it.

Dazai huffs, lifting his hand from where it's been resting on top of Chuuya's, cold but comfortingly, and using it to wave off the apology like it's a pesky fly. "It's fine. Don't even worry about it."

Fine? That's a bad sign. Chuuya knows all too well that with Dazai, things are never just *fine*. He never drops an obsession once it has infested his brain. No, his only way of neutralising it, is pursuing it, and of course, that only fuels the monster - creates a temporary high of goal-directed behaviour that mixes with his childish tendencies to turn it into a game for him to win. And then, inevitably, he goes full feral lock-jaw-dobermann and doesn't let go until he has pried his success out of his opponents bleeding, lifeless hands.

So... he's definitely plotting something super sinister, and all Chuuya can do is await the inevitable attack and hope his defences are strong enough.

Rough and irksome is what it is, being friends - *being in love* - with such a complex being. (But it's not like Chuuya is under the illusion that he's any less of a mess. The reason he has such a deep understanding of Dazai's corrupted virtues is because he shares them. Case in point: his infatuation with Dazai; a cataclysm that repeatedly destroys his inner landscape only to regrow in the arid soil of its own disaster.)

It's complicated. But in a way that doesn't make sense, but somehow still makes perfect sense to Chuuya, it's also the simplest most *un*complicated thing: He loves Dazai for all his multifaceted magic; his enchanting charm, sharp intellect, guarded vulnerability, reserved intimacy, shy kindness - his dismissable *and* his less dismissable quirks. Sweet. Simple... Unrequited. Painful.

Suppressing the urge to let out a soul-wrenching moan, Chuuya leans back in his chair, elbows bent, head resting in his hands. Super easygoing. He craves a cigarette, but he supposes coffee and breakfast will have to do for now, which reminds him - "Eat your breakfast, marshmallow."

Dazai ignores the well-meaning prompt, materialises a book out of the old-fashioned satchel bag he uses for school and focuses on that instead of the plate in front of him. He holds the book open with one hand while he clutches his coffee cup with the other, occasionally lifting it to his lips to take a too-loud-to-not-be-intentionally-obnoxious sip.

The silence feels like hugging a wet and itchy woollen sweater. Dreadful. Chuuya can't bring himself to *hate* a material with so much historical importance, but he strongly dislikes wool.

On top of that, Chuuya feels like he's being shunned, and he may be fairly decent at handling high-stress situations, but low-level social tensions - those really fuck him up. It's intolerable. Dazai just sits there with his dumb half-lidded eyes, smiling at his dumb book, basking in his dumb deafening silence.

"Interesting book?" Chuuya asks. Bland question, but it's all he can come up with, and he, arguably regrettably, feels compelled to say something.

Dazai hums a melodious little agreement. “Very. It’s about a student who’s in love with his teacher.” He closes the book - or rather *slams* it shut - aggressively enough for Chuuya to startle, and Chuuya *never* startles.

“Anyway," Dazai says, airily, "I won’t bore you with the details. I’m sure you think love is terribly unfashionable.”

Chuuya thinks no such thing, but it’s not like he gets the chance to say that before Dazai follows up with, “and I best be on my way, or I won’t make it to professor Sanosuke’s office hours.”

It’s quite frankly a miracle that Chuuya manages to not roll his eyes at that. “Of course. You wouldn’t want to miss that. It’s not like you go to all of his office hours.”

An indecipherable look settles on Dazai’s face. “My thesis is about research I’ve done in his lab, and I want him to supervise my PhD project next year. It’s pretty important that I make a good impression.”

In a languid movement, he slides out of his seat, stretching with a little yawn, arms over head, shirt and abominable sweater vest rising just a little - sadly not enough to show a peak of bandages drawing around narrow hip bones. (Chuuya feels a little dirty for wishing for such a view, but the heart wants when it wants.)

Grabbing his plate with his less than half-eaten breakfast, Dazai strolls across the room, nose in the sky. He plonks his plate into the porcelain sink. A sharp, piercing clink rips through the air. “Impression management is important,” Dazai trills over the overtones of the shrill noise.

“Right.” Chuuya knows he sounds standoffish, but he can’t help it. Whenever the topic of best-person-ever-Oda-Sanosuke is brought up, Chuuya’s own light fades to a dim flicker. He likes to think that he’s a catch but compared to Dazai’s favourite professor -who is allegedly the cleverest, hunkiest, tallest person of all time if the gossip Chuuya has heard from Dazai and his classmates is true - Chuuya doesn't have much to offer (except fancy fabrics and an eye for detail).

For a second, Chuuya considers taking the low road and make some snarky remark about how Dazai should stop pining for his professor - because actually, student-teacher relationships are totally unethical and surely, best-person-ever-Oda-Sanusuke wouldn’t dabble in immoral affairs.

It’s tempting to try to destroy Dazai’s hopes with fake moral superiority and bitterness, but Chuuya doesn't want to make himself the enemy of Dazai’s misdirected love...

… Dazai's misdirected sure loves making itself Chuuya's enemy, though - it's just so incredibly obnoxious and obvious.

At all times, Dazai just emanates that bright blushy aura of being in love - cheeks always a little pink, pupils always a little blown (if Chuuya didn’t know better, he would think Dazai were experimenting with the drugs he synthesizes in the lab). It’s fucking disgusting and so beautiful Chuuya could cry.

Oh yes, it’s unmistakable that Dazai is in love, and it's widely known that he has feelings for his professor. Too many times to count, Chuuya has overheard conversations between Dazai and his classmates. Yosano, Dazai’s new lab partner, *constantly* teases him about his “massive crush,” snickering at how obvious Dazai is and encouraging him to "just make a move already."

The thought makes the room spin and nausea toss around in Chuuya's stomach. He likes Yosano, considers her a dear friend and all, but he doesn’t appreciate her enabling Dazai’s professor-lusting antics. Fuck everything.

Seemingly completely oblivious to Chuuya’s state of internal chaos, Dazai moves to behold himself in the mirror on the far wall of the kitchen - the one with crested margins imported all the way from France (because Chuuya is a bit of a francophile). A statement piece; a beautiful antique that lights up the room with its old-soul presence, bevellings manifesting signs of their age with soft shadowy streaking, some of the red oxide undercoat showing through the frame.

The mirror’s age-clouded glass reflects the morning sun's soft rays and makes a honeyed halo shine around Dazai’s head. Pretty. Disgustingly so.

Dazai adjusts his glasses, and with a delicate flick of his hand, he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear. “So do I look okay? Am I making a good impression like this?” He shifts his weight, popping a hip to the side, pose emphasising his lithe romantic figure. “Do I look clever?” he adds, observing his reflection, head tilted to the side as bites his bottom lip.

It’s almost like he doesn’t know… Chuuya finds it absurd to think that Dazai doesn't realise how gorgeous he is - he has two well functioning

eyes (at least with the correction of prescription glasses) that should be perfectly capable of assessing the mirror image and conclude that he is the most stunning human to ever have existed. *Ever*.

“You look very clever,” Chuuya says dutifully, knowing that he must resign himself to only give boring compliments like ‘you look clever’ lest he wants to reveal all of his bleeding heart.

Dazai snaps his head around, eyes bright and drilling into Chuuya's skull.

Chuuya has no idea what that look means, but he’s also not reckless enough to ask. He’s a pretty daring guy, but challenging Dazai’s weird non-verbal signals is not something anyone does if they value their sanity. Instead, he sets his cup back on the table. A loud clunk echoing through the room in synchrony with the intensity of the look on Dazai’s stupidly pretty face.

Chuuya clears his throat. “I mean, if I were you, I’d consider dropping the disco ball around your neck, but yeah, you look very clever.”

The razor-sharp look stays put on Dazai’s face. He huffs, shakes his head, and when he stops the motion, his features have slid into something significantly more mellow, a cute little smile - perfectly charming but also perfectly fake. “The bolo tie stays. It adds a personal touch -- makes me stand out.”

Chuuya doesn't comment on it, he simply raises an eyebrow, lifts his cup slowly, sips quietly.

Turning his head back around, Dazai stares into the mirror like some neurotic evil fairytale queen. “I hope I stand out to Oda-sensei.”

Chuuya tightens his grip around his coffee cup. There’s a bitter current rolling through him, and it wants to smash something into the ground. He takes a steadying breath, controls his tone, keeps it steady as he speaks the voice of reason, “Why does it matter what he thinks? He’s grading your papers, not your looks.”

“Oh, Chuuya.” Dazai's tone is flat, heavy like he’s burdened with infinitely more insight that Chuuya could ever hope for. “You’re a designer. You should know that aesthetics matter.”

Biting down on his tongue so as to not spit out the bitter venom that’s sloshing around in his mouth, Chuuya watches as Dazai hauls his bag full of books and notes over his shoulder.

“See you later, Chu-Chu,” he says, and in a whirlwind of mismatching colours and rustling textbooks, he brushes past Chuuya, leans down to place a quick peck to Chuuya’s cheek -- and then he’s gone.

The door closes behind Dazai with a faint *click,* and Chuuya is left alone with the company of a lukewarm cup of sweetened coffee and a book about a student-teacher relationship.

His cheek is burning, the feeling of Dazai’s soft lips lingering like a dream that fades ever so slowly as wakefulness takes over.

He picks up the books, turns it and reads the summary on the back.

An intriguing and sinful exploration of seduction, forbidden love and redemption. This is a captivating and wildly passionate tale of enigmatic and sexy, Professor Nakamura's escape from his personal demons as he tries to earn forgiveness and love from the most forbidden source; sweet and innocent Suzuki Asahi, a graduate student enrolled in his class.

How scandalously common, and completely lacking in sophistication. Chuuya has read his fair share of erotic novels, so maybe he isn't one to judge… But that's not going to stop him - he *is* judging Dazai for reading such garbage.

There’s no fireplace in the apartment where he can burn the heinous novel, so instead, he takes to throwing it at the wall. It plunges to the floor with an ungraceful *plop.*

Realising he has been holding his breath, Chuuya inhales deeply. That air smells like Dazai - ink and lavender and the very personification of exquisite intricacy, the absence he leaves behind when he storms out the door without looking back over his shoulder. Heavy like velvet.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! Here's a rose for you 🏵

Dazai wears glasses in this because I'm obsessed with that one official art where he wears glasses (you know the one). I also like to think Chuuya has ADHD, it's not really important to the story, this is just me giving myself the representation I think I deserve lol. So now you know why he stims and gets a little lost in his own thoughts sometimes.

I had to do a lot of art, design & aesthetics research for this fic and it turns out that a lot of BSD authors have written essays

about these topics! Junichirō Tanizaki's In Praise of Shadows was a particularly delightful read. I highly recommend it!

I've definitely been looking at this for way too long so I'm not sure if this even made sense? I hope it did and I hope you enjoyed it. Let me know in the comments (but please be kind, I'm very sensitive). I love kudos too!

Come say hi: twitter or tumblr

Chapter 2: Transmitters & Receptors

Chapter Summary

In which Dazai discovers stretching exercises and Chuuya suffers.

Chapter Notes

Hello, beautiful doves. Hope you're all doing well and life is being kind to you.
This chapter took me forever to write because I decided that I hadn't done enough background research into fashion and (lingerie) design. So I had to go and do that first. But here it is. Finally. \(˚ ワ ˚)/

Chapter notes: Sumi-e: a type if ink painting

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya drags his restless body into the kitchen. His exhausted-but-racing mind follows right behind - much like a balloon that's attached to his head, spinning in the wind of his hyperactivity, reliving the details of a long and exciting but uphill first day as a lingerie designer.

His own home is supposed to be a safe-zone, but apparently, nowhere is safe. Because right there, in the comfort of his favourite room in the apartment, he's brutally attacked; met by the last thing he knows how to deal with –

– Dazai, the fucking menace, in the skimpiest, snuggest, silken, blush-pink hot pants Chuuya has ever seen (and Chuuya is a designer, he has seen things).

Now, Chuuya isn't dumb enough to not have expected some kind of ambush - he's fully aware that Dazai never gives up without a fight. But no amount of mental preparation and character-strengthening exercises could ever have buttressed Chuuya against *this*.

Dazai is on the floor, flat on his back and stretching his absurdly long legs up towards the sky with his toes pointed. It's a very convincing impersonation of a prima ballerina.

Gorgeous. In a very overwhelming way.

Chuuya feels like he's drifting. That buzzing-vibrating feeling in his head, lightning clouds filling his ears, cotton and electricity wrapping around him at the same time.

Honestly, Chuuya doesn't ask for much. All he wants is a cup of coffee that's strong enough to catapult his floaty mind back into his body and an understanding best friend who wants to listen to him recounting the dramatic details of his job as an overly idealistic designer. (It's hard work, being on a quest to grasp the essence of beauty through the art of lingerie when he's up against an established system of 'Mainstream Trends' and lifeless mannequins).

But alas, what Chuuya gets instead, is a goddamn cardiac arrest. Why did he think it was a good idea to move in with Dazai in the first place. What kind of masochist moves in with their unrequited crush (best friend or not).

Quietly, he internally combusts. Dies a little as he beholds the piece of performance art of human sensuality Dazai is putting on. It's marvellous, but it's not a show Chuuya remembers buying a ticket for, so he feels like a ginormous creep for attending it uninvited. He also feels like his pants are getting a little tight, and that's unacceptable.

"What are you doing?" Chuuya hisses, although he's not at all sure he wants to know. All he really wants is to feel like he's actually *allowed* to look at those endless legs that Dazai waves around in the air like propellers. Touch those legs. Peel the bandages off those legs. Sink his teeth into-

"I've discovered something groundbreaking - stretching!" There's an overly cheerful lilt to Dazai's voice and a self-satisfied grin plastered on his face. He's clearly very pleased with himself.

"Uh-huh. "Chuuya is fairly certain Dazai is aware that 'stretching' has been around since time immemorial and is simply choosing to ignore the boring facts of reality for the sake of his own amusement. It's… a wise way to go through life, Chuuya supposes.

With flexed feet and majestic poise, Dazai lowers one leg and pulls the other towards himself. The snug shorts ride up a little to show a peek of inner-thigh, an electrifying flash of soft skin between where the bandages end and the tiny hot pants begin.

Is he even wearing underwear? If he is, it has to be a very tiny, skimpy excuse for underwear.

Chuuya notices that his fists are tight, and he has forgotten to breathe. Taking in a gulp of air as subtly as he can, he collects his scattered thoughts and tries to direct them towards his original goal of getting coffee.

As though in slow-motion, he gravitates towards his blessed beacon of distraction-from-Dazai's-legs: the espresso machine.

And distractions are generally speaking a great shield against unwanted outside influences, but no amount of distraction can save Chuuya from himself, and even the smell of fresh coffee beans can't put a leash on his dumb impulses - impulses which desperately want to comment on Dazai's new exercise routine.

"Good for you," Chuuya blurts, noting, very regrettably, that his voice sounds like it's being squeezed through a bagpipe. He clears his throat. Clarifies. "Stretching is good for you."

"M-hmm. Very good. Very good for my health. Just like sugar." Dazai bends a knee and settles into some sort of side twist that has his microscopic shorts squeezing his thigh. "I'm turning myself into a sweet snack."

None of this hothead Dazai-logic blabber makes any fucking sense, but Chuuya can't find the where-with-all to point that out when he's too busy being pathetic, gawking at Dazai with an open mouth. He's two seconds away from drooling.

Goodness. So unpresentable.

Snapping his mouth shut, Chuuya spins and finally sets about making coffee. He keeps his eyes fixed on the task, humming an aggressively cheerful tune under his breath to help himself stay grounded. Not drop out of reality and into a distant hypothetical scenario where things are different... Where he could join Dazai on the floor. Fit himself between Dazai's long legs.

Investigate what's underneath those abominable shorts. Press kisses into Dazai's collar bone, and – "Oops".

"Oops, what?"

"Oops, nothing. I just thought about something I wasn't supposed to think about," Chuuya responds without looking over his shoulder to check if Dazai is staring back at him like he has lost his mind. Chuuya certainly *feels* that way. Reeling and only holding on by the

fingernails.

Still, he operates the espresso machine with surprisingly steady hands. Fills the portafilter with a double-shot dose of coffee, tamps as evenly as he can (in his uneven state) and inserts it into the nozzle. Pulls a shot.

“Chuuya?” Dazai’s silky voice carries over the loud, grinding buzz of the coffee-brewing process.

“Hmm?” Chuuya stares intensely ahead at nothing. He knows he's coming off as suspicious, moody and bad-mannered, but he can't spin around to face Dazai before he has wiped his face of all the tells that are no doubt painted across it.

If Chuuya can't find a suitably blank mask, Dazai will instantly know what’s up. He’s annoying like that - reads Chuuya and everyone else like they’re gossip magazines, only to report the newest scandal back to their faces.

“Chuuya, darling. You seem so tense. Is your job stressing you out? Do you need a massage?”

The pet name feels like a dull, rusty knife straight to Chuuya’s heart. A word so oxidized that it doesn’t have any strength left. A sweet but essentially empty form of flattery that Chuuya should have become totally desensitised to as it's something the fashion world bombards him with every day (especially his eerily charming but intimidating boss).

And yet it hurts as much as any cheap replica hurts a designer's heart. Because Dazai will readily say 'darling' and mean nothing in particular by it - will use the term of endearment to stroke a naive conversation partner's ego, as a placeholder for a name he can't be bothered to articulate, or even as a slur. Now that Chuuya thinks about it, he’s pretty sure that he has even heard Dazai refer to his demonic ex-lab partner as 'Fyodor-darling'.

... Dazai can be brutal without even intending to.

The last drops of liquid fall into the cup, waving through the black pool of coffee. And along with the fading ripples, Chuuya’s excuse to keep his back turned to Dazai fades.

Time to face the music. Picking up the cup with both hands, Chuuya whirls around.

And Dazai must be satisfied with having all attention back on him again because he locks eyes with Chuuya and smiles brighter than a ring-light as he slowly, with almost theatrical daintiness, pushes himself up to a cross-legged sitting position.

He adjusts his glasses and looks at Chuuya in that researcher-who-has-just-made-a-discovery-that-confirms-all-their-hypotheses way of his, which always makes Chuuya feel like a cell culture in a Petri dish.

"Chuu-ya," Dazai repeats, slow, low and insistent. There's a curve to his lips, and right beneath the surface of the serious tone is an underlying current of amusement that registers clearly over the rush in Chuuya's ears.

"Yes. What?" Chuuya ever so casually lifts his cup, takes a generous sip of newly brewed heavenly espresso. Except it's not heavenly. It's a volcanic eruption that scorches the insides of his mouth mercilessly, and Chuuya is going to set fire to his oesophagus if he swallows this lava.

So he has no other option than to spit it back into the cup, coffee dripping from his mouth, down his chin, onto his overpriced off-white silk shirt.

So fucking unsuave.

"Uh, what?" he says again as he straightens his shirt and tries to compensate for his discomfiture by forcing a confident smile.

Blinking slowly, Dazai's gaze lifts from Chuuya's coffee-sputtering mouth to his eyes. "Did you even hear what I said? You seem very distracted today."

"Sorry, sorry. It's just, y'know, work. I've been all over the place trying to prepare mood boards, illustrations and samples at the same time. Head full of lingerie." Chuuya waves a hand around to symbolise the up-in-the-airness of his occupational life. "It's all just very new and a little overwhelming."

"So about that massage..."

Chuuya would love to say yes to that, but the luxury of choice seems as out of reach as his ability to control his feelings. Chuuya may be a strong-willed piece of steel that can sustain all sorts of hard-hitting insults, but he's easily broken by soft gestures and the idea of having Dazai's clever hands roaming his body... That sounds like outright

torture.

“No-no. I’m fine. You don’t have to.” Chuuya hides his face behind the cup, blows on the hot drink before taking a measured sip, careful not to burn his tongue this time.

A smile (that somehow seems a little *too* bright) flicks across Dazai’s face. “Alright. Your loss.” He reclines so he’s leaning on his side, propped up on an elbow, knees bent and flopping to the side in an artfully seductive live model drawing class pose. “Oh, by the way, my favourite classmate is coming over for a study date in a minute.”

“That’s nice,” Chuuya leans against the counter. Takes a deep, steadying breath before allowing his eyes to drift over Dazai’s lithe form. “Are you going to change into something… more… more… uh, decent?”

Dazai raises an eyebrow. “That’s prudish coming from a lingerie designer. No, I don’t think I will. If Yosano-kun can’t handle all this glory-” he lifts a hand slowly, building dramatic effect – and drops it hard; smacks his maddeningly squishable outer thigh, “-she can leave.”

“Ooh-kay. Makes sense.” Chuuya feels like he should have a witty response, but he also feels like his brain is seeping out of his ears from the strain of exerting self-control and not just scream at Dazai to put some fucking clothes on.

Chuuya viscerally detests those shorts for how visually appealing they are. The way they catch his eyes and demand attention with their soft pink glamour and ruffled silk creases. It’s so hard not to look at the way they highlight Dazai's already-illegally-poetic figure. Those legs.

Dazai is right, though (loathe as Chuuya is to admit it). The designer card doesn’t grant him permission to tell anyone what to wear or not wear.

And when Dazai reaches for the soft peach-coloured oversized sweater that’s thrown over one of the kitchen chairs, he does it in an almost defiant manner. He makes a whole show of putting it on, eyes meeting Chuuya’s as soon as he has popped his head through the hole, hair a fluffy mess, glasses askew, and smile crooked. “It does get a little cold with leggies out, though,” he chirps.

The sweater is long enough to cover most of the wicked shorts. Only the soft pink edges stick out from under the hem. On anyone else,

such a style clashing combination of clothes would seem utterly unfashionable, but Dazai somehow manages to look classy even when he’s dressed like a dessert.

He's a sweet marshmallow that Chuuya wants to sink his teeth into.

As though he can read Chuuya’s thoughts, Dazai asks, “I look fetching, don’t I, Mr Fashion?” He spins around in a little pirouette, stops, strikes an exaggerated pose with hips swaying to the side, arms over his head and soft facial features sliding into a smoulder. He’s not pulling the ice-queen look off very effectively, lips twitching with a poorly suppressed smile, eyes round and glistening. Playful, even.

He’s impossible not to adore. That damn affection-snatcher.

“Yeah. Pastels suit you.” Chuuya says instead of spitting out the ‘can I kiss you?’ that’s tingling on the tip of his tongue.

♡♡♡

Yosano arrives in a whirlwind of clacking heels, colour-coordinated notebooks and mighty aggression directed at graduate school’s workload. “I’m so not in the mood for this shit,” she declares as she drops a brick of a textbook onto the dining table that serves as a makeshift workspace. “I study medical neuroscience because I want to bore holes in skulls with a cranial drill, not because I enjoy reading about neuronal communication."

A prickly silence stretches for one, two, three whole beats.

When neither Dazai nor Chuuya dares to comment on Yosano's altruistically motivated sadistic whims, she corrects herself. “Don't get me wrong. I love hanging out with you two. It just sucks that all we ever do together is sweat over work, textbooks and exams.”

“Ah, well.” Dazai lifts a shoulder in a half-shrug (as someone who never sweats over exams because they already know they'll do well does). “You start your clinical rounds next semester, so hopefully, you get to sweat over craniotomy at some point in the near future.”

And with that, they all gather around the table in their respective productivity rituals; Dazai and Yosano to study. Chuuya to produce some first-class fashion illustrations.

Drawing is Chuuya’s favourite self-soothing practice, and creativity is his secret superpower - it always helps him think clearer.

Right now, though, he's hoping, not just for sharp thoughts, but for a golden eureka moment because he's still dealing with the unsolved obstacle of desperately needing a fitting model and having no solution in sight.

Unfortunately, he appears to be in a particularly easily distracted mood, attention constantly drifting to his studious friends on the other side of the table.

Dazai and Yosano quietly read by themselves. Occasionally, they lift their heads to share a deep look that probably telepathically transports important lab-partner-relevant information between their quantum computer brains. They barely talk as they study, and it’s sort of eerie to behold the two of them - so in tune with their twin-like scholastic grace as they turn pages and take notes. (Or, in Dazai's case: uses his pencil - not to take notes - but as a chew toy. Oddly grotesque. Oddly charming.)

Dazai looks up, catches Chuuya’s eyes above the rims of his glasses. Quickly, reflexively, almost as though the brief eye contact burns him, he drops his gaze again.

A small secretive half-smile twitches at the corner of his lips as his eyes skim perpendicularly across the page in a scanner-like movement. His cheeks seem to have turned a deeper shade of pink. So, so, so cursedly pretty, and Chuuya’s heart is perpetually crumbling.

Entrancehdly, fondly, and a little annoyingly automatically, Chuuya finds himself wondering what Dazai might be reading that has him looking so bashful. But the curiosity is almost instantly squashed when he comes to the inevitable conclusion that it’s most likely a piece of shit academic paper by his professor-idol.

Chuuya isn’t one to pity himself, he’s usually a self-efficacious legend, and if he’s unhappy about something, he takes the necessary measures to change it. But some things, like who Dazai chooses to throw his love upon, are out of Chuuya’s control, and unfortunately, Chuuya lacks the finesse to just get the fuck over it.

No, his unrequited feelings are a big stinking pile of tragic garbage piled on top of more tragic garbage, and Chuuya can’t stop himself from rolling around in it like a little pig.

Focus. Chuuya needs to stay focused.

He looks at his illustration, frowns at the slightly exaggerated, idealised and stylised human figure he has drawn. It looks so unfinished and flat.

It's hard to envision this faceless, nameless, 2D illustration in lingerie, and he's embarrassingly tempted to draw bandages around its legs, arms and neck just to ignite his inspiration...

He can't do that, though. Not with Dazai sitting right across from him.

Applying a little more pressure than strictly necessary, Chuuya sets about outlining the basic shapes of a corset. He already feels frazzled, obsessive and a little gross. And to make matters worse, that's when Dazai starts adding a running commentary on the paper he's reading, effectively breaking Chuuya's already wavering focus completely.

"Isn't it fascinating how noradrenergic alpha-two and alpha-one receptors are differentially involved in the modulation of prefrontal cortex-dependent processes?"

With an unenthusiastic nod, Yosano grunts in reply. Unlike Chuuya, she doesn't seem to be paying Dazai much attention.

That, of course, doesn't deter Dazai from banging on about whatever it is he's talking about. "What is your favourite receptor, Yosano-kun? I quite like dopamine receptors."

This time around, Yosano doesn't as much as lift a shoulder to acknowledge Dazai. Head dipped, and eyes trained on the book.

Dazai leans into Yosano's space, poking her arm with the eraser-end of his pencil. "Akiko-kuuuuuuuuuun?"

"Shh. I'm trying to focus. We can't all just take mental photographs of the page and download the information into our brains. Some of us actually have to *read* to comprehend. Bother your boyfriend instead."

Boyfriend. Usually, Chuuya's balance is pretty good. He has a good feel for his own centre of gravity and carries himself with balanced grace - but all of a sudden, the world starts spinning, and he nearly falls off the chair.

But at least he's not alone - Dazai is acting weird too; he doesn't correct Yosano's misapplication of the boyfriend label. Instead, he looks at Chuuya, a gentle smile tugging at his lips like everything is

fine.

Chuuya is decidedly not *fine*.

“How do you feel about dopamine receptors, Chuuya?” Dazai asks, unhinged enthusiasm fluttering in his voice.

“I don’t know anything about them,” Chuuya admits because honesty is a good policy when it’s available. He has been repressing a lot of truths lately, and it feels nice to be open about something so straightforward and *simple*.

“Dopamine receptors regulate a lot of behaviours, but I personally like them because they play an important role in the reward system. It’s the chemical that makes us feel giddy and high when we, uh, take the brightly coloured pills Fyodor offers us - which of course we would never do ... or when we’re in *love* .” He dips his head and looks at Chuuya through his lashes, glasses sliding down, making him scrunch his nose to keep them up. “When the right neurotransmitter binds to the receptor side, there’s an influx of charge through ion channels, and that changes the membrane potential of a neuron. Isn’t it cool how receptors and neurotransmitters fit together like lock and key?”

Yeah. Very cool. Science can be so romantic.” Chuuya agrees, nodding eagerly. To his flamboyant, flowery artist’s mind, neurochemistry sounds exuberantly poetic. This receptor-neurotransmitter stuff is just about the most soulmate-esque thing he has ever heard of.

It seems to work on similar principles as his attraction to Dazai. The way Dazai's intelligence sinks barbs into Chuuya’s facade makes it impossible to focus on anything else but the melody of his voice as he recounts the insights of his beautiful mind.

Chuuya could listen to him all day. Wants to steal his words of wisdom right out his mouth, wants to taste the shape of genius on his tongue…

And oh. This isn’t straightforward and simple at all. This whole situation reminds Chuuya of the tricky process of working with delicate, easily fraying materials like chiffon, georgette, silk, and organza. Needle marks are all but impossible to remove from these fabrics, so it’s important to work with a sharp needle. Chuuya has to stay sharper than any needle to navigate this situation, or he’s going to tear himself apart.

Dazai’s lips twitch with a smile. There’s something amused, and

reckless, and so *knowing* about it that Chuuya wonders if his thoughts are so loud that they broadcast. If Dazai is aware of all the turmoil in Chuuya's no-doubt dopamine soaked brain.

Or maybe Chuuya is just over-analysing.

It's undeniably an unwise choice for his emotional health, but he doesn't have enough self-control to not ask for more material to analyse. "What? You're looking at me like there's something you want to say."

Dazai grins as he props his head in his sweater-pawed hands. "Oh, I just want to tell you more about the romantic science of transmitter-receptor dynamics."

"I'm all ears."

"They belong together, and the receptor is always yearning for the transmitter. It wants so badly to be unlocked, *penetrated*, by its neurotransmitter," Dazai purrs in a voice that wraps around Chuuya like thick silken sheets.

"That's... fascinating," Chuuya licks his lips, cheeks heating up under Dazai's warm attention.

The intensity in Dazai's eyes turns to fire as he flutters his lashes, settling into a heavy-lidded look. "Right? And how do you feel about-"

"Okay, that's enough," Yosano groans, pointing an accusing finger at Dazai. "You're being so distracting. I get that you're obsessed with this new receptor-penetration metaphor that you just invented and that you desperately want Chuuya to know all about it. But maybe you could tell him about it later? Preferably, after our study session."

Dazai purses his lips, gives a reluctant nod. He's cute. And kissable. And...

Chuuya shakes his head - shakes off the pesky persistent fantasy of Dazai's deplorably soft-looking rosy lips and tucks it back into the dark recesses of his mind where it belongs, in one of those boxes that come with a big, bright warning: 'Danger. Explosive material. Do not open.'

Focus… *refocus*. Clutching the pen hard, he splatters ink across the paper in an impressionistic frenzy, drags the blobs into precise patterns with a steady hand, channelling sumi-e artistry to the best of

his ability.

Delicate lines, understated patterns and roaring details. The secret always lies in the seemingly unnecessary details. Garters. The addition to any lingerie set that quite literally holds the whole thing together. Except it *doesn't*- ever since the invention of elastics, the garter has lost its use-value, and these days, it barely pays lip service to the idea of functionality, mostly there as an accessory. Still, it sticks around for its aesthetic appeal, and Chuuya is morbidly fascinated by any trend that manages to edge its way into fashion canon on the grounds of being too beautiful to resist despite being utterly useless.

Yes, Chuuya's main inspiration is something as ineffable as *beauty*, and he looks for it in everything.

In his job, he tries to walk the tight line between the traditional and the avant-garde, balancing the celebration of simplicity with the eccentric and unique.

He likes things to be tastefully flashy from afar but drizzled with subtle cracks, roughness and other imperfections up close. It's an elegance spun from the esoterically profound, gracefully remote, and deeply mysterious, and it's his favourite type of beauty.

As a designer, that sort of ideal is hard to chase, what with the fashion industry being so preoccupied with the visual appeal of clothes. The rounded qualities of mysteriousness and imperfection often have to be provided by the wearer rather than the garment itself. It's a lot of pressure to put on the consumer and therefore, Chuuya wants his creations to be as gentle on the eye as it is on the body - wants the wearer's body to merge with the fabrics, to feel held and supported by his designs.

Achieving that kind of wearability in high fashion is no easy deed. Hence the importance of working with a talented and trusted fitting model. Someone capable of impersonating beauty in all its multifaceted glory and who gives honest feedback on the Fit and Feel.

Chuuya lets out a low sigh. He can physically feel his brain falling apart, a twinge undulating at the back of his head, the final warning before the last fuses burst. He's overworked, and his mind is about to restore equilibrium by switching off.

So unsurprisingly, his good-for-nothing attentional spotlight once again leaves work-related matters to wander across the table and latch on to its favourite subject. Dazai.

Dazai, with his artfully messy hair - dark brown like chocolate, which Chuuya wants to devour without mercy. Dazai with his ridiculously well-proportioned muse-like features, as soft and delicate as a watercolour painting (hello to bright, dewy eyes - hello to soft lips - hello to everything). Dazai with his tall and stick-like allure. Dazai: as gorgeous as ever.

And Chuuya can't stop his whirlpool-mind from imagining things. Panties, garters, knee-socks. Dazai's endless legs wrapped in sheer stockings. Waist held by a pin-dot mesh front-lacing corset with delicate silk ruffles sewn into the side seams, the frills falling over his hips, emphasising his sweet curves. He'd look so disgustingly perfect.

"Oh. Oops." Chuuya says out loud. *Again*. Like a fucking idiot.

Dazai lifts his head, looks at Chuuya from a tilted angle. "Oops, what? Oops, you just thought about something you weren't supposed to think about?"

"Yeah..."

"Oh, Chuuya," Dazai reaches across the table and pats Chuuya's hand, only for Chuuya to realise that he's holding the pen so tightly that his fingers have almost lost feeling.

Dazai traces the dips and hills of Chuuya's knuckles with a finger. "Take a break," he says, making it sound rather like an order - low and purring.

And just like that, leaving Chuuya a little stunned and shivering, Dazai gently lets go, puts his glorious attention back on his school-work.

Nagging, shameful, tumultuous desire gnaws at Chuuya's very soul. He's thankful for having Dazai in his life, of course. He *is*, but... but forcing gratitude for having Dazai just as a friend when Chuuya greedily wants him as a friend *and* lover (and model too) is a difficult, continuous struggle - one that requires the strength of a martyr.

Every day, it pushes the limits of Chuuya's poor yearning heart. It's pining, longing, and passion thrown together in what feels like his own emotions playing a game of unethical human experimentation on him.

Chuuya will never find anyone he'll be capable of loving half as much as Dazai, and although the world is packed full of gorgeous people, he also doubts that he'll find a model that can match his beauty.

Distantly, Chuuya notices that his legs have started to bounce, and his fingers are drumming against his thighs. Restless. His eyes twitch. Unfocused.

His whole body is dis-coordinating in a collapse that imitates the frustrating process of threading a needle with split-end thread and shaky hands.

But then something bright and flickering seizes his attention. He trails the narrow stripe of light and notices a glittery butterfly hair clip in Yosano's hair. It catches the sun's rays and reflects them into Chuuya's eyes in morse-code-like bursts.

And oh. Could that be a sign? A solution to one of Chuuya's many problems; the universe slapping him right in the face with an obvious truth: Yosano is pretty. *Very pretty*.

Sure, she isn't as ethereal as Dazai (but then again, no one, except Dazai, is as ethereal as Dazai, so that's hardly a fair standard to hold anyone to) - but she's graceful and charismatic. She'd probably make an excellent model.

There's something almost blasphemous about interrupting a study-session, so Chuuya keeps his voice low. "Yosano-kun?"

Both Yosano and Dazai lift their heads in perfect synchrony. They stare Chuuya down with identical brands of sharp honour-student-powered curiosity.

Being under the spotlight of two such brilliant minds is a lot. Almost too much. But Chuuya isn't one to believe that it's ever okay to chicken out, so he powers on with his head held high.

He can feel the weight of Dazai's eyes as needle pricks on his skin and as magnets to his attention, drawing him in. To avoid looking back, he stares intensely at Yosano. "I was wondering if you'd be interested in helping me out with something work-related," he starts, and to add a bit of visual aid to the sales speech, he turns the illustration he has been working on 180 degrees to show her what it's all about. "I don't know if Dazai told you this already, but you see, I'm working on a lingerie collection, and I'm looking for someone who can help me model the designs."

Yosano blinks. Doesn't say anything.

"It's paid work, of course. *Well*-paid," Chuuya rushes to add.

“You’re asking me?” Yosano's tone is hesitant, but there’s the tiniest hint of a prideful thrill underneath the surface.

Chuuuya will cling to that; pander to whatever grandiosity she possesses because she deserves both praise and a confidence boost. “Yes! You'd be the perfect model. I just know that you'd make the designs come alive. You practically embody the sharp confident vibe I’m aiming for with this collection.”

It’s the truth. But only half of it. The untold whole that's left out is that Chuuya likes to balance every sharp design-element with the delicacy of rounded forms. He adjusts his clean lines and shapely designs with heaps of softness; lace trimmings, smooth edge silk applique, glittery accessories, powdery pastel colour palettes...

... Dazai looks so dreamy in soft pastels...

... Which, of course, isn't relevant. So Chuuya won't dwell on it.

He continues the spiel with a bright tone. “You’re perceptive and honest, so I'm sure you give helpful feedback.” And because Chuuya isn't afraid of sounding corny when it's in the name of giving heartfelt compliments, he lays it on thick with a, “and you’re also one of the most beautiful people I know.”

---*SNAP. CLONK*---

Instinctively, Chuuya jolts his head in the direction of the harsh sound.

Dazai is clutching half a broken pencil in his hand while the other half rolls around on the table with perpetual-motion energy and a rattling sound.

“Whoops,” Dazai offers, smiling at Chuuya with a deathly intensity. “Flimsy little thing. Breaks so easily.”

“... Evidently,” Chuuya says, nodding his head understandingly. In his experience, pencils don’t break easily, but he sees no need to comment on it, opting to protect his mind from the crazy-making rigours of getting into a discussion about the (meta)physics of writing tools.

It's not that he doesn't enjoy driving himself to the edge of sanity bickering with Dazai because that *is* one of his favourite pastimes. It's just that he's too conscientious to get swept away by easy pleasures when he's in the middle of a business proposal.

Straightening his spine, he twists his upper body back towards Yosano. “So Yosan-”

“Actually, Yosano-kun is very overwhelmed by the heavy workload this semester," Dazai casually throws in, although no one asked him. "And we’ll be super busy in the lab, so it’s not a good idea.”

“It’s going to be a rough semester,” Yosano agrees, head angling to look at Dazai. “If only there was someone who was both pretty *and* on top of his studies enough to have time to model on the side.”

“Ah yes, if only.” Dazai fans himself with delicate wrist flicks and a coy smile flashing in Chuuya’s direction. “Oh, wait. I’d actually fit those criteria… that is, if Chuuya thinks I’m pretty?” His words are wet concrete, and Chuuya sinks right into it, his dumb fondness leaving heavy footprints. Of course, he thinks Dazai is pretty. The prettiest.

But he's not having the manipulative tactics, and he’s certainly not about to answer to the compliment Dazai is fishing for. “Oh, wait. You forgot that we already discussed this and agreed that it wouldn't work.”

And with that final blow to Dazai’s interjections, Chuuya gives Yosano a pleading look that he hopes she won’t be able to turn down.

She responds with a smile but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. There’s something very ambivalent about it. “Well in that case…” she trails off, purses her lips in a pout, sighs, picks up again, “I’d love to help you out, Chuuya-kun. I’m sure I’ll be able to make time if I just shuffle things around a bit.”

"Wonderful!" Chuuya meets Yosano in a warm and firm handshake.

It should feel great. One of his problems has been solved, but for some reason, he doesn't feel like much of a load has been taken from his shoulders. It's a victory that feels like wearing one of those vintage style dramatic shoulder-padded jackets - but stuffed with *lead*, weighing him down.

“Wonderful indeed,” Dazai’s voice cuts through the air.

Chuuya turns to look at him. Dazai doesn't look back. He’s holding up the two broken halves of his pencil against each other, staring at them with an unreadable look on his face. He’s still not meeting Chuuya’s eyes when he mutters, “I’m very happy for you two.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading 💕 I hope you enjoyed this chapter.
The next chapter will have less "SKK unintentionally hurt each other's feelings" and more spice 😏

I love kudos and comments. Thye do wonderful things to my shrivelled little self-esttem

I commissioned art of Stretchyzai from the wonderful and talented Lex!

Chapter 3: Is This Happiness?

Chapter Summary

Chuuya suffers.
And then he has a sad wank about it.

Chapter Notes

Hello my beautiful butterflies

I hope you are all well and the sun is shining on you wherever you are (if you like sunshine. If not, I hope a fluffy little raincloud drizzles on you)

I'm so sorry this is HORRIBLY belated (it's all uni's fault. Exams. Bleh) but I am back with heartache and questionable grammar :3

I hope you'll like this chapter. Thank you so much for reading

Chapter notes:

- Lacing gap: The space between the edges of the center back (or front if it's a front-lace corset) panels
- Piped trim: Piping is a type of trim or embellishment consisting of a strip of folded fabric so as to form a "pipe" inserted into a seam to define the edges.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The floor seemed wonderfully solid. It was comforting to know I had fallen and could fall no farther. - Sylvia Plath

Click-rattle, click. Click-rattle, click.

The heels of Chuuya's boots ring against the naked, pale, peach-coloured marble, silver clasps clattering with every step. The corridor's ambience sings back the same tune call-and-response style: the satisfying echo of grace and power. Loud minimalism.

Mori Designs headquarters is an architectural pearl, and it provides surroundings that make Chuuya feel understood, mirrored and *right* at home.

With his coat billowing in the breeze of his bouncy steps, he rounds a corner. Course set for his new important-person private office.

The door comes into view. There's an engraved silver plate mounted on it, Chuuya's name and title cut into the surface with sharp precision.

Chuuya beholds it with a certain sense of self-referential awe, grandiosity crackling along his spine with the same warm distortion as an old sewing machine.

A metallic taste, something like stubborn defiance, spreads in his mouth as he chews his bottom lip. He may be alone, but he can feel the weight of a mental audience watching him – every lingering ghost of his past. The sneering teachers with their 'you'll never amount to anything' mantras. The fake friends with their knives wielded, ready to stab him in the back. The entire fucking backbone of an unfair, piece of shit, classicist society that doesn't want to see people like Chuuya - people who come from less than nothing - succeed.

Proving them wrong feels magnificent.

He takes a deep breath, exhales sweet victory as his designer-gloved hand curls around the handgrip. "Cheers to me. May all the motherfuckers who didn't believe in me eat shit and die."

With a flourish, he swings open the door to his new kingdom, to new adventures.

And just like that, new adventures smack him right in the face.

"Waaa-hah?" Shock catches Chuuya in a vice grip, unravels him like a badly knitted sweater.

Thoroughly surprised. The bothersome sort.

With unblinking eyes and a gaping mouth, he stares at the sight in front of him (at what he believes to be a mirage – his unruly imagination having developed sentience to torture him): *Dazai.* Dazai wearing nothing but strips of silk and lace, fabric draping like liquid rose quartz over his willowy body. And it's not just any old off-the-rack lingerie set he has squeezed himself into. It's one of Chuuya's design samples.

Behind Chuuya, the door falls shut with a soft click that sounds like the very last beat of a worn-out heart.

Chuuya can relate to that. So in an act of camaraderie, he leans against the door, clutches the handle for balance and extra stability. “What the-” he croaks, the words turning to sandpaper in his throat, scratching his vocal cords.

“Hi,” Dazai waves a hand as he twists from foot to foot - like he can’t quite settle on a proper pose.

It’s cute even if it reeks of affectation, and for all Chuuya hates phoneys, he sure wants to dote lovingly on Dazai’s posey coyness… but what Chuuya wants is beside the point because he wants *everything* from Dazai. And he wants it with an intensity so violent that there’s no way it’s healthy or ethical.

So Chuuya does the only thing he can do. He bottles up the burning pit of his greed and covers his eyes to avoid invading Dazai’s privacy (and his own steadily deteriorating sanity).

The tinkle of Dazai laughter jiggles the stuffy confines of the room with a foreboding kind of delight. “Don’t be like that. You’re allowed to look at your model, Chu-chu,” he chirps ever so melodically.

Swallowing hard, Chuuya lowers his hand; lowers his gaze with it. The polished shine of his shoes stares back at him with cold disinterest.

Of course, he’s only given a second to sink into his meltdown before Dazai pulls him out of it with the soft lilt of an awaiting destiny, a demand framed as a gentle request. “Chuuya?” The ‘look at me’ goes unspoken, but Chuuya hears it loud and clear.

So he wills his features to relax before the vein in his forehead pops, forces a good-natured smile upon his lips, gazes back with lazily curious raised eyebrows and fists that are only a little clenched. “Dazai. Marshmallow. What are you doing here and why are you wearing… *that?*” he gestures vaguely at Dazai’s form but keeps his eyes from wandering, focus honed in on Dazai’s face in the hopes that he might be able to read it. That a little insight into Dazai’s mind might help him navigate the intricate subtleties of the situation.

Unsurprisingly, Chuuya’s efforts are for nought. Dazai has wrapped himself in his favourite secrecy-embroidered veil: absolute obscurity. His face reveals nothing, and the polished smile he offers instead of a proper answer reveals even less.

No matter how hard Chuuya looks, All he finds is a bottomless lake

staring back at him. Chuuya is stubborn, though, and he will drown before he gives up, so he presses on with the interrogation, accusation sliding into his tone. “What did you do to Yosano?”

Something about that question seems to set off a reaction in Dazai who turns up the watts on his smile – bright, sweet, and absolutely wicked.

Chuuya doesn’t like that smile, but at least it’s one he can read It’s the one that Dazai wears when his defensiveness hardens his edges, the one that says *you’re asking stupid questions.*

“*I* didn’t do anything,” Dazai’s voice is thick with the mellowness of feigned innocence, dense and as highly textured as corduroy or a bent truth.

Migraine-floaters flash in the periphery of Chuuya’s vision. “Really?”

“Really-really.” Dazai winks, and he probably thinks he’s cute, and he may be right about that, but cuteness is no antidote to trickery.

Chuuya’s head hurts with unanswered questions bouncing off the insides of his skull. He grasps one of them; “How did you even get in here?”

“That should be obvious. I *work* here.” Dazai lifts his nose in the air. There’s a certain sense of self-evident righteousness to his demeanour, and it fuels something nasty in Chuuya – the urge to stomp his foot or something equally childish.

“No, you don’t,” Chuuya counters through the wry line of his mouth, afraid he’ll start screeching if he opens it any wider.

“I do. Just got hired. I’ll show you the contract if you want.”

“What the *fuck*, Dazai?” It comes out sharply enough that silence follows. An insulated, purged sort of vacuum. And there, in the non-space of it all, Chuuya finds the mental clarity to count to ten and draw on the dregs of faith-in-friendship to continue. “Dazai, when I say no, I mean no. I told you that I don’t want to work with you. You can’t just go behind my back to get your way.”

Dazai’s mask drops. Underneath is the blank sheet of a face that’s scared of itself. “I just thought…” he trails off like crochet stitches coming apart.

“What?” Chuuya grunts as he takes his hat off and throws it across the room where it lands on the cutting table – slapdash on top of a pile of glittery fabrics. He rakes a hand through his hair, the soft leather of the glove brushing through the strands. “Just *what* were you thinking?”

“I thought I knew you,” Dazai says. Like that’s a fair thing to say during an argument.

“You do know me, you total ass.”

“That’s why I'm so confused.” Dazai pouts and pushes his glasses up his nose, the angle magnifying his eyes – making him look even more owlish.“You’re sending me mixed signals.”

Chuuya does cringe at that, recognising the agonising truth of it. And maybe he’s no better than Dazai when it comes to honesty because all he can do is mirror Dazai’s sullen pout.

It’s a stalemate. A silence like a too-tight woollen straightjacket, the heat of confinement prickling Chuuya’s skin. The itch makes him peel off his gloves, drop them to the floor.

A glimpse of something like shattering glass reflects in Dazai’s eyes as he drops his gaze to the floor along with the fallen gloves. When he lifts his head again, his mouth twists into a fine-drawn smile. “But you’re right. I do know you.” With delicate movements, he sways closer, chaos raining down around him. “And I know for sure that you’re never unnecessarily cruel, so when you asked Yosano to model your lingerie collection right in front of me…” he shakes his head, soft hair and an even softer tint of secrecy flying around his head. “I decided that there had to be a rational explanation. I thought I had it all figured out.”

Shame and frustration slosh in Chuuya’s stomach, but he stays composed. Raises an eyebrow, waves a hand for Dazai to continue.

A signal Dazai accepts with skittish grace, the porcelain of his perfect face crackling with the thoughtful look that slides over it. “And I know you know me too – I know you know how unpredictable my moods are. I figured you thought that I wasn't serious about modelling for you, so I decided to *show* you how much I want to do this.” His voice is small even as it wraps around big words: “I’m sorry.”

It sounds genuine and feels like chains tying around Chuuya’s chest, cruel iron braces superintending his pain. It’s exhausting.

For all he appreciates the grace of a sincere apology, he doesn't appreciate being cast as the bad guy who walks around and hurts his best friend's feelings. It makes indignation hiss right underneath the surface of his carefully reigned-in composure. It's *so* exhausting.

And there's no easy outlet. No swearing, no yelling, no throwing things around, no storming out. Chuuya firmly believes that whoever has the wisdom to run away from their anger lives to fight another day, but he isn't nearly as wise as he's someone who enjoys a good fight. So he stays and accepts his defeat – accepts that his need for connection outweighs his anger. It's so, *so* exhausting.

"I'm sorry too," Chuuya lets out at the end of a sigh because that's all there is to say by way of capitulation. Unfortunately, though, Chuuya will have to say more – ruin the softness of the moment like a big, gaudy, colour-clashing brooch slapped on top of an otherwise perfect outfit.

Again, his hand finds its way to his hair, sweaty fingers waving through the locks. He feels greasy. "I'm sorry, but you can't be my model. It won't work."

Dazai's voice is but a wisp when he replies, "why? You keep saying that like it's a proper explanation, but it's not."

In a blessed move of enlightened self-preservation, Chuuya evades the question. "Just… change back into your regular clothes, okay?" He turns around, not wanting to be creepy and stare Dazai down as he trudges back to the shoji screen in the corner of the room that poses as a make-shift changing room.

And Chuuya stupidly thinks it's the end of that argument, that Dazai will, for once in his life, follow Chuuya's directions. But no. He hears no shuffling; no indication Dazai is springing into any sort of action. And when he looks over his shoulder (careful not to scan Dazai's body, only meeting his eyes), Dazai just stands there. Still, stoic and statuesque, clearly waiting for something.

And yeah, he does look sorry, all meek and humbled. But there's also a coldness to it, and more than anything, he looks like he's about to snap – to take his regrets out on someone, ruthlessly.

In one swift move, Chuuya spins back around, bringing himself face-to-face with the confrontation he doesn't want to have. "What are you waiting for?"

Dazai's eyes narrow into a downright deathly slant, a look that's usually reserved for when he talks about pseudoscience or his not-so-beloved uncle. "Why won't you even look at me?" His tone is dangerous, a rusty scissor that runs up the seams of Chuuya's badly crafted excuses.

"What do you mean?" Chuuya asks, seeing no other option than to play dumb. The truth is too heavy to drop. It could break their friendship. And so, it will simply have to be Chuuya's burden. Something he has to carry alone.

He reaches out a hand, but Dazai swats it away, making a pesky insect out of it.

"Is it the bandages? Are they not aesthetically pleasing to your artistic sensibilities?" Anger flares and flickers in Dazai's eyes before it's watered down with dejection. In a raw sort of whisper, he adds, "or is it what I'm hiding under the bandages."

And that's when Chuuya realises that he has inadvertently stepped right in the landmine that is Dazai's well-camouflaged insecurities.

The moment of realisation hangs in the air: a tenuous thread, slowly giving way, gently tattering, begging for a hand to reach for at the breaking point.

Desperation moves Chuuya into action. "No," he all but shrieks as he tries to grab Dazai's wrist -- and this time, Dazai allows it.

Chuuya rubs his thumb in little circles over Dazai's pulse points, his cold skin. "You've completely misunderstood. I think you're absolutely perfect. Bandages and all."

Slowly, keeping eye contact to monitor all reactions and make sure he's not overstepping, he lifts Dazai's hand; tenderly places a kiss on top of it. "Perfect," he repeats, the sharp sincerity of a single word cutting his lips as it leaves his mouth – violent with the adoration it's infused with.

The point seems to get across. Chuuya can practically feel the tenseness seep out of Dazai's bones, his muscle tone going slack, wrist turning into a dead fish in Chuuya's hand.

Dazai's face betrays less though, unreadable when he says, "How kind of you to give me the gentle letdown speech. I'm perfect, but still not good enough for the job?"

“It’s not about being good enough. You’re more than enough. It’s just–”

The conversation ahead is full of dead ends, and only a lie will serve as an escape route. Chuuya hates lying for a lot of reasons, the most pertinent being that he has no talent for it. It’s a shitty conundrum that leaves Chuuya no option but to settle on a compromise: a half-truth.

“I’m afraid it will ruin our friendship,” he says, and he doesn’t choke on it the way he would on a proper lie, so he considers it an overall win. He stands straight in the echo of his own words, tries to embody someone whose mere say-so bears an inordinate amount of self-evident strength.

But Dazai doesn’t have a deferential personality, and he isn’t afraid of poking holes in the fabric of constructed reality by asking questions that are above his clearance level. So, of course, he tilts his head, face falling into thoughtfulness. “Why would it ruin our friendship?”

Chuuya is still holding on to the lifeline of Dazai’s wrist, and his fingers idly toy with the edge of a bandage. “Why would it ruin our friendship?” he parrots, buying time as he treadmills his mind for answers.

Because I'm irrevocably, painfully, madly in love with you, and I think I'll internally combust if I have to look at you and touch you in lingerie in a professional way when I want to do it like a lover – Chuuya doesn’t say. He chokes back the truth that he has swallowed so many times that it has become a sentence tattooed into the back walls of his throat and offers a reasonable confabulation instead. “I guess I'm just afraid of having a professional relationship with you and how that could change our dynamic. You’re my best friend, and our friendship means so much to me.”

“I see.” Dazai muses, sounding somewhere in-between reluctantly convinced and suspicious. He puffs out a small sigh as he lowers his head, eyes still peeking at Chuuya through the soft curtain of his bangs. “Okay. If that’s how you feel... Our friendship *is* more important than anything else.” He spins his hand, grabs Chuuya’s wrist so that they’re locked together. Infinity symbol style.

Gently, Dazai sways their interlocked hands. “I really am sorry that I stressed you out with this stunt. I wanted to–” he cuts himself off with a headshake, and there’s something so very twitchy about it. Almost

like he physically can't contain the thoughts in his head.

Chuuya knows that feeling all too well. It's something he deals with on a daily basis. Still, there's something unnerving about the way in which Dazai wears his disquietude. It doesn't fit him, and Chuuya wants to *fix* it. The designer in him is itching to dress Dazai up in a ball gown made of borrowed confidence; hold him together with tightlacing and admiration.

But it doesn't work like that. Chuuya can't just slap a fancy outfit on top of Dazai's self-deprecating brand of grandiosity and call it a solution. The style-clashing bandages and the perpetual neurosis will still be there, peeking out from underneath.

The only thing Chuuya *can* do is be brave and ask for clarification. "It's okay. I won't get mad this time. Tell me what you were thinking?"

A gut-wrenchingly melancholic look sweeps over Dazai's features, lingers for just a second before it's replaced by a poised smile. "This promotion is important to you, and I wanted to be a part of it."

"Right..." Chuuya chews on it – or more accurately: chews on his lower lip. It's an awful lot like Dazai to go and insert himself into situations that aren't about him, and despite the utter shamelessness of it, Chuuya still loves him for it.

Smile tilting, Dazai shrugs. " I wanted to help. But I just made everything worse, didn't I? How typical of me. I'll drop it now." And he does just that; drops Chuuya's hand along with the argument.

Relief doesn't soothe Chuuya's nerves the way he thinks it ought to. He *should* be able to relax now that Dazai has finally given up on the modelling obsession. But of course, Chuuya's feelings have to go and get all jammed up and make it utterly impossible for him to be the kind of person who finds meaning in simple pleasures like winning an argument.

Winning feels like losing when Dazai looks so fucking bravely dejected, crestfallenness poorly hidden under the facade of a placating smile.

And Chuuya hates it. Looking at Dazai outright *hurts*. Hurts in places that Chuuya is sure aren't supposed to hurt. Every cell in his body seems to have developed sentience just to scream at him to reach out, caress Dazai's chin, wipe that mask off his face (preferably with a kiss,

but that's not really on the table).

With all the sorrowful grace of a ballet dancer who is portraying the dying heroine, Dazai spins around and strides towards the shoji screen.

It's impossible to tell if he's putting on a show or not, but in either case, it's effective; he sways, and the lingerie clings to his body as tenderly as a lover. The panties are a little too big, but somehow they still look dashing on his slender frame, waistband loosely slinging around his tiny waist.

Painfully beautiful.

Chuuya digs his nails into his palms, eyes never leaving Dazai. Observing. There's a floating bounce to the way he walks – like he's trying to do a catwalk even after he has declared his model aspirations over.

But it's not a convincing performance. His shoulders are slumped, and he's hunching in on himself slightly. Like a kitten that's been stuck in the rain for hours.

And Chuuya is simply the kind of person who rescues stray kittens, so there's only one thing for him to do. "Dazai," he croaks, inelegant and urgent. "Wait. I've changed my mind."

Dazai whirls around, fixes Chuuya with a laser beam stare. "You what?"

"I- Uh," Chuuya flounders awkwardly, half-sure that he's about to make a huge mistake. But then again, he has burned for *so* long *so quietly* anyway – every romantic fantasy he has ever had about Dazai another knick on his soul. At this point, he's so damaged that he might as well accept another lethal wound. "I changed my mind."

"Just like that?"

"Yes," Chuuya says, unapologetic and bright with a jittery confidence that's almost definitely fueled by madness. "I changed my mind just like fucking that. I'd love it if you'd model for me... if you still want to."

The too-discerning, stone-faced look on Dazai's face blooms into a sunny smile. "I do. I really, really do. Of course."

“Good,” Chuuya returns softly, feeling a lot like he just bought his own casket.

And that should be it, but of course, it isn’t. Dazai is an unscrupulous little shit, Chuuya knows that, so it’s no surprise when Dazai’s stupidly pretty smile twists into an impish smirk. ”Hey, Chuuya? Was it seeing me from behind that changed your mind?”

A tingling sensation makes its way down Chuuya's spine, in response to Dazai’s words. Yeah, He’s definitely not going to survive their newfound professional relationship if this is what it’s going to be like. And still, there's a giddy euphoria in giving into self-destruction, a creative muse that tells him that he wouldn’t want it any other way.

Breaking eye contact, Chuuya turns to sort through his desk for safety pins and measuring tape, “Lets, get to work, marshmallow,” he says, gracefully avoiding to comment on the point of seeing Dazai from behind.

Chuuya gets to work with mostly steady hands. He’s an impartial professional, wrapping the tapeline around Dazai’s waist with gallantry so gracious as to cover up how much of a mess he is.

Compartmentalisation. That’s a skill Chuuya needs to work on. Separating actions from feelings.

Present conditions are a bit more blurry, though, and his thoughts can’t delineate a clear-cut difference between concepts. There’s work, and there’s pleasure, and there’s torture... and then there’s the unholy combination of the above, which Chuuya has found himself in as he tries to tug on the seam of the slightly too big pantie and pin it in place without touching Dazai.

Inevitably, nerves make him slip up. His sweaty fingers let mistakes run through them, a pin runs wild, and all Chuuya can do is watch his slipup in real-time – as the pin tears through Dazai’s bandages.

“Aw,” Dazai yelps, whole body tensing with the force of a ridiculously low pain tolerance.

Quickly, Chuuya withdraws the needle. His hand tickles with the impulse to rub the pain away, but that would require touching Dazai’s hipbone in very unprofessional ways, so Chuuya crushes his urges with a clenched fist. “Sorry,” he mumbles as he continues his work,

eyes decidedly fixed on the task instead of meeting Dazai's gaze, "work hazard."

"'S okay," Dazai's voice chirrs from somewhere above, "you could always kiss it better." He follows up by shuffling, weight shifting from one foot to the other, one knee bending, hips swaying dramatically to the side, and-

---*smack*---

Dazai's silk-clad ass swings like a pendulum and whacks Chuuya's poor unsuspecting cheek.

There's about two seconds of frozen confusion while Chuuya lifts a hand to cup his heated face. Then, there's another four seconds, give or take an eternity or two, where he holds his breath as he angles his head to stare at Dazai, who looks back at him with wide eyes and a lower lip worrying between his teeth.

"Uh, sorry." Dazai hunches in on himself, but although he paints a convincing picture of meek apologeticness, he sounds more amused than sorry when he says, "that wasn't on purpose."

If not for Chuuya's unmatchable stubbornness, he'd give up and fade out of goddamn existence. As it is, he's too headstrong to let something as flat and lightweight as Dazai's ass knock him out. He exhales the tension and makes quick work of rising to his feet and hide his blushing face by stepping behind Dazai.

"Don't worry about it. Just another work hazard." Chuuya fixes his focus on the tapestry of silk, bandages and patches of soft skin in front of him. Reaching out, he traces the lacing gap, little whizzes of forbidden attraction shoot through his twitchy fingertips as he does.

It has already been fitted, but just for good measure (or to have something to do with his hands) he tugs on the lattice strap detailing. "Hmm. Should I tighten it a little more?" he asks by way of moving the conversation along.

"I can't breathe," Dazai complains, wiggling in Chuuya's hold.

And Chuuya isn't put in this world to perpetuate the myth that corsets are torture devices, so he promptly releases the silk straps. Honestly, he doesn't know what he's acting so weird for. "Sorry," he mutters. Again. Vocabulary full of ad-libbed, flat apologies.

When he lifts his head and meets Dazai's eyes in the mirror, the world stops, and Chuuya has to begrudgingly acknowledge what he's acting so weird for: He's acting so weird for Dazai looking so damn *romantic* that Chuuya could collapse under the weight of it.

Finally, Chuuya allows himself to study the totality of the sight in front of him. He touches Dazai with his eyes, reverently. Traces the lines of his lithe body – the corset hugging his waist, the panties stretching over his flat-yet-charming ass, the garter bands squeezing tight around his thighs in a way that makes Chuuya envy an embroidered band of elastic…

Feeling misplaced jealousy of one of his own designs is a new low for Chuuya, but the fact that he's succeeding so thoroughly in terms of producing well-fitting lingerie is a high that makes up for it.

Dazai is a vision. Even with the pinned adjustments, which make extra fabric flap at the sides like small and utterly impractical wings, he looks more stunning than any butterfly.

"Wow. You…" Chuuya trails off. He'd be ashamed of his un-suaveness and the pale inadequacy of the language that's waiting on the tip of his tongue, but he strongly feels that if he doesn't try to express his feelings in words, his reverence is going to spill from him as tears instead. So he has to continue, "you look beautiful." Simple. True.

It's not news, of course, that Dazai is beautiful. But seeing him personify beauty through fashion design does unprecedented things to Chuuya's already smitten heart. Dazai is mystery, and pain, and knowledge, and the sweetest compassion, and his essence seeps through the clothes – gives it life.

"No, *this*-" Dazai says, smoothing his hands over his chest and down his waist, silk and lace ruffling under his fingers when he digs his nails into his sides, "-this is beautiful. I feel so honoured that I get to wear your gorgeous creations."

A little flushed, Dazai takes to fiddling with the garter around his thigh, turning and twisting preening-pigeon-style to behold himself in the mirror.

Something about the situation is clearly affecting Dazai enough that he feels the need to act comically unnaturally about it, and Chuuya finds it endlessly endearing.

It's times like these that Chuuya can sling himself into a kaleidoscopic

state of self-serving denial and cheat himself into believing that his feelings are reciprocated. That they're in love in that beautiful earth-shaking way; the way that feels like the whole universe is conspiring to bring them together. Not in the way where Dazai has the hots for his professor while Chuuya is being torn apart from the inside by unrequited love; the way that feels like a smoking gun pressed against his forehead: *your love or your life, come on Chuuya, make the call.*

Chuuya puts on his careful consideration face, hopes it's glitzy enough to cover up his overwhelm. Like that, hiding behind forged nonchalance, he meets Dazai's eyes in the mirror. "Yeah?"

"Of course. Chuuya is so talented, and he deserves all the praise," Dazai offers on a sleek, conspiratorial purr – almost like he knows what compliments do to Chuuya… he probably does know.

It's only through sheer willpower that Chuuya manages to keep himself steady on his gelatine legs. He feels weak, and that's when - almost as a last desperate survival strategy - his snark levels spike and his instinct for self-preservation nosedives. If he's going down, he's going down hard.

"Let me-" he says, urgent and frazzled. Driven by reckless impulse, he grabs Dazai's waist with both hands and spins him around so that they're facing each other. So physically (and if Chuuya is to be poetic about it, metaphysically) close. "-Let me check one last little thing," he hears himself whisper, head floating somewhere above his body as he grasps either side of the low neckline to stretch it – Dazai's heartbeat dancing under Chuuya's touch. Once Chuuya has checked that the fabric stays crisp and doesn't stretch, he trails the front seam lines where the pattern pieces connect, making sure that the lining feels smooth under the shell. There's no steel boning, the panels are constructed to hug the body, not constrict it. (Chuuya's corset-design philosophy, after all, is to emphasise the erotic power of the form while employing more modern, flexible materials to improve comfort).

"How do you feel? Is it comfortable?" When Chuuya looks up, he goes cross-eyed with the intimacy of their shared personal space and quickly steps back – out of the burning spotlight of Dazai's nearness.

Dazai opens his mouth. Closes it again. Finally, he puffs out a muted, "yeah."

It's not the detailed feedback Chuuya could wish for, but he can't care.

Not when Dazai is so close, and so wonderful, and everything Chuuya wants – within arm's reach.

---*Rrrrrriiinnnggg*---

The shrill horror of Dazai's ringtone blares through the room. It washes the soft look off Dazai's face and replaces it with a wry grimace.

"It's okay," Chuuya waves a hand, "we're all done fitting this."

"Sure?"

"Yes, yes. Go answer the call. Maybe it's important."

Dazai glares at the phone screen, then picks up and says in a tinkling voice that's the very antithesis to the venom in his expression. "Fyodor-kun. Light of my life, fire of my loins. What can I do for you?"

It makes something ugly churn inside Chuuya, a monster scraping its sharp nail along the inner lining of his stomach, acid seeping out of the wound. Dazai's tendency to cover everything from discomfort to outright hatred in pleasantries and flirtation throws Chuuya for a loop; makes him question the reality of his own experience.

He looks at Dazai – how blushy and pretty he looks wrapped in lingerie. Exquisiteness; put in this world to inspire everyone around him with his bewitching, ineffable Dazainess. But as much as Chuuya wants all that, and the last hour of his life, to be *real,* he knows that 'realness' (especially where Dazai is concerned) is nothing but a hall of mirrors.

Chuuya throws off the existential ruminations. It doesn't really matter. Even if Dazai should turn out to be made of nothing but cardboard and pearly paint, Chuuya would still love him in all his one-dimensional wonder.

A rather purposefully fake-sounding laugh rips Chuuya out of his reverie. It's interesting, observing Dazai's calculated way of navigating phone calls, face completely flat but voice reeking with pathos as he trills. "Oh no-no, don't worry your pretty little head about that. I'm in." With that, he lowers the phone again, eyes rolling up as though looking for answers to difficult questions in the cracks of the ceiling.

There are, however, no cracks in the ceiling. Mori would never allow

such a thing in his empire.

What there is though, is a fine line between being naturally curious and obnoxiously nosy. For the most part, chuuya walks that line with practiced grace. At times, though, his ‘need to know’ gets the better of him. “What was that about?”

“The university is hosting a neuroscience symposium tomorrow. One of the researchers cancelled at the last minute, so the organisers want to fill his slot with student research presentations.”

“Oh. So they're asking you? That’s really cool.”

“Yeah,” Dazai says, but he doesn’t sound like he finds the prospect particularly riveting. He doesn’t sound like he hates the idea either, he just sounds like the most anhedonic version of his enigmatic self. “Fyodor and I had an article published in a stupidly pretentious but very prestigious scientific journal last year. They want us to present that research.”

There's muted apprehension about the way Dazai talks about it, and Chuuya rather thinks it has something to do with Dazai’s cleverly concealed discomfort at big social gatherings.

“Hey. I think it sounds like a good opportunity, and I support you one hundred percent, but… If you don’t want to do it, you don’t have to. Saying no is okay.” Chuuya isn’t sure if Dazai wants to hear it, but it’s a truth Chuuya himself often needs a reminder of, so if nothing more, it’s at least a note-to-self.

A smile dances on the edge of Dazai's lips, knowing.

It makes Chuuya feel all sorts of unnecessarily defensive. “I’m just saying.”

“And what you’re saying is very true. But I want to do it.” A fuzzy look paints Dazai's face. He seems far away, and there are soft flickers of pleasant daydreams lingering in his voice when he adds, “Oda-sensei will be there.”

“Ah yes. Don’t wanna pass up an opportunity to impress your favourite professor.”

Dazai nods eagerly, and then he does his thing: he spins the wheel of his changeable moods, random picker landing on... something, which from Chuuya's perspective, can only be described as ‘eerily elated’.

Dazai throws his arms over his head, the corset's pinned adjustments almost coming apart with the motion. “Exactly! It will be grand. I’m sure Fyodor and I will blow their socks off.”

“I thought you didn’t like Fyodor,” Chuuya wonders out loud as he tries not to have an aneurysm from Dazai almost undoing all the fixings with his erratic movements.

“I don’t. But that doesn't mean I can't *pretend* to get along with him just for one evening. I like giving my enemies the impression that I've forgiven them; nothing annoys them more.” He waves a hand around in a gesture that means nothing particular at all. “Just because I'm a good pretender doesn't mean that I’ve actually forgiven anyone. Ever. In my life.” A worryingly heavy sigh. A twitchy shrug. And then his mask of lighthearted carelessness slides back on. “But you know how it is. The world doesn't sit around and wait for you to come to terms with your feelings. The show goes on, and you gotta learn how to play-act. All the world's a stage, y’know.” He says it with enough pompousness to make it sound true. Maybe it is true.

In any case, Chuuya spares a snort to be both horrified, awed and endlessly charmed by Dazai’s devious reasoning and his ability to explain simple things in a way that makes it sound like he’s explaining the cosmos.

“So, do you need to leave to prepare for tomorrow?”

“Only if we’re done here.” Dazai spreads a hand over his hip, fingers idly tracing the piped trim of the corset, and Chuuya’s eyes instinctively follow the motion.

Transfixed for a second, and then Chuuya remembers that he’s not supposed to let his eyes wander. He snaps his head up to find Dazai looking back at him with a smile that crinkles his eyes. It’s one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it, cutting a dimple into Dazai’s cheek – brutally sincere. And it matches his tone beautifully when he says, “Chuuya comes first.”

For all Dazai’s sincerity (given his… *whimsical* personality) is hard to trust, Chuuya - fuck everything - believes it. And his emotions, of course, react by blowing up a hurricane that clips his core, last threads of sanity blowing in the wind like clothes hung out to dry in a rainstorm.

He scrapes the barrel of his mental faculties to come up with an appropriate response. “It’s fine. I have some sewing to get done,” he

gestures at Dazai's pinned-in outfit, "I'll fix the adjustments and go about preparing more samples. We can continue tomorrow."

A coquettish bow, and then Dazai spins around and disappears behind the shoji screen. His body exists between light and shadow as he gets changed – elegant silhouette projected on the paper panels, twisting and twirling.

Only the wheezing quality of Chuuya's breath and the shuffling of clothes interrupt the serenity.

Dazai emerges fully clothed in his armour: his questionable fashion choices. His glasses are a little askew and his hair tosses every which way. He gives the impression of someone who love has left rumpled and a little unhinged. Beautiful, beautiful creature.

Smoothly, he moves past Chuuya. "K' I'm off," he cheers, the jest doing little to smooth out the ruffled leave-taking. He's already halfway out the door and Chuuya, pathetically, misses him already.

The iron grip of illogical desperation seizes Chuuya and shakes him until he rattles off an embarrassingly squeaky sounding, "wait."

Dazai promptly spins around. "Yeah?"

"... See you later." The words clatter in Chuuya's ears. Clumsy and rough. He has never heard anyone use a valediction as a desperate, wailing 'I love you' before, but he supposes there's a first for everything. Or maybe words simply don't mean what Chuuya wants them to mean, and everything is unfair.

The kiss Dazai blows in return, floats through the void space between them and lands on Chuuya's cheek like a fist.

Then he's out and the door clicks shut behind him. Left is a stale vacuum, and all Chuuya can do is collapse against the cutting table and heave in lungfuls and lungfuls of defeat.

Sometimes everything is just too much. He can't think fast enough to process the last hour of his life before it catches up to him and pulls him under.

Overwhelmed.

The room starts swimming in Chuuya's vision, colours and shapes blending into a blurry avant-garde pattern that would make for a

tasteful print on a flowy summer dress but makes a horrible mess of Chuuya's mind.

His eyes close around fantasies. His mind is full of lingerie, so rather unsurprisingly, the visuals on the back of his eyelids reflect that. Garters with ribbon ties. Thin embroidery-trimmed stockings. High-cut panties. Front-laced corset belts.

Perfectly professional things for a designer to think about, but… but now that Chuuya has witnessed the wonder that is Dazai in lingerie, everything else feels like the absence of Dazai in lingerie.

So, that's inconvenient and embarrassing, and everything else Chuuya can't deal with. At this point, Chuuya doubts that he knows how to think without thinking of Dazai.

He barely gets a second to spare a close-eyed eye-roll at himself before his internal reverie descends into madness: disconnected images of amber eyes, bandages, and delicate fabrics dance behind his closed eyes. He imagines slipping a thin silk strap off Dazai's shoulder for better access; imagines peppering kisses along his collarbone, teeth sinking into peachy skin, tongue catching on the raised welts of scars.

Worship. The unrestrained kind.

Desire zaps through Chuuya's core. It rolls around in his stomach and spills from his lips as a bitter laugh. "Here I fucking go again, thinking about things I'm not supposed to think about."

But it's unstoppable. His mind wraps around Dazai like a flowy silk robe, trimmed with the delicate lace of Chuuya's longing around the breezy cuffs. His bones strain under the unbearable weightlessness of it – the reality he's not living. He wants it so badly. Wants Dazai.

He rests against the leg of the cutting table, hoping it will give solidity to his melting body. It doesn't. His self-control is a balloon filled beyond capacity, and it's going to explode if he doesn't let the air out of it. So he lets go. Deflates.

With defences lowered, Chuuya is helpless against the scenarios his traitorous brain throws at him. All he can do is sit back and watch as his mind projects high-definition images of Dazai's flawlessness on the widescreen of his awareness.

Ah yes, The blessing of a vivid imagination is also its curse. It's so easy to imagine Dazai falling to his knees, shuffling closer, as he looks at

Chuuya through his lashes, the burning amber of his eyes swallowed by his pupils. It's even easier to imagine capturing his jaw, thumb stroking along his sharp cheekbone – Dazai melting into the touch, obedient...

It's wrong. So, so *wrong*. But nothing can make Chuuya indulge his depravity quite like his misery. "Fuck it," he says – and immediately regrets it – and regrets absolutely nothing as he unzips his trousers, shoves them down with no decorum, dips his hand into his underwear and cups his dick.

The feeling of pressure against his arousal shoots through his veins and straight to his head, making his daydreams accelerate: Dazai peeking out his tongue to give the tip of Chuuya's cock an experimental lick, nibbling on the tip as he hums a little melody that sounds both desperate and appreciative. Then, without warning, he sucks Chuuya's cock into his hot mouth, tongue flattening against the sensitive spot right underneath the head.

With a whimper of surrender, Chuuya starts pumping his dick - lets into the lie that his hand is Dazai's warm mouth, lapping from the base back up to the tip.

The point of no return catches up to him almost immediately. Somewhere, distantly, on the very back burner of his perpetual Dazai-obsession, there's a shrill voice telling him he should be ashamed of how fast he's capable of working himself to full hardness with his best fucking friend on his mind. But he ignores it because shame is for people with their trousers fully on.

"Fucking fuck it." Right then and there, Chuuya decides that real courage is all about seeing shit through. No matter how doomed it is.

So with *courage* and insanity pulsing through him, he twists his hand on the upstroke and picks up the pace. The drag is rough, but he kind of likes it. The discomfort gives the pleasure the edge of pain it deserves – that *he* deserves.

Day in and day out, Chuuya actively subdues his natural brashness in order to navigate the refined design world, and giving into tastelessness makes him feel absolutely feral. Like he could do anything; get away with mixing gold and silver, get away with using viscose instead of silk… get away with jerking off to thoughts of Dazai.

All sense of style and propriety is lost, and the travesty of it spurs him

on. Because at this point, it doesn't matter if the intricate tailoring of decorum unstrings. All that matters is that Dazai is glimmeringly gorgeous like this – in Chuuya's fantasies – his intelligent eyes glazed over and mouth stuffed full of dick. Real or not, it's a view worth more than a ten billion yen masterpiece, a perfection that has Chuuya balls tightening, his entire being reduced to throbbing need.

Nails scrape lightly along the underside of his straining cock. It's too much, but too much is not enough to make Chuuya stop. He shivers through it and keeps going. Faster and harder.

Heat overflows, dizzying and electric, bolting through him with hundreds of volts of more, more, *more*. The world turns as Fantasy-Dazai bobs his head, a maddening combination of teeth and tongue.

Chuuya is lost to the realness of his imagination. He can practically touch it – the outline of Dazai's reddened lips. See it – the gorgeous drooling mess Dazai has made of himself. Hear it – the filthy noises Dazai produces as he takes Chuuya's dick so deep that it hits the back of his throat.

Fuck.

"Ah-hnngg," Chuuya throws his head back, and it slams into the unforgiving hardwood of the table leg he rests against. Colours burst in his vision, and for a second, he wonders if he has given himself a concussion... and then, he decides that he doesn't care because the mental image of Dazai sucking cock looks wonderful through a prism.

Clenching his teeth to muffle the sounds that want to spill from his mouth, Chuuya exhales through his nose, shuddering. His hips jerk, and he bucks into his fist, again and again, rough pressure and hot friction sending him towards oblivion.

So, so close.

It's uncoordinated, but there's magnificence in the chaos – in the sharp tugging and tweaking, in the slick pleasure that spikes deep in his chest and radiates outward to the tips of his fingers and down to his toes. He curls his hand one last time and imagines it's Dazai moaning around his cock.

"Ff--- ah." And with that, Chuuya fractures; breaks under waves of pleasure that sweep through him as white ribbons spill over his hand. His body floats, loose-limbed and lighter than air.

Bliss slowly releases the hold on his body, and a feeling that can't be described as anything but 'cruel rawness' substitutes the lightness. He blinks his eyes open to find a world that's a little off-axis, surroundings coming back to him in a swirl of muted colours that seem lifeless and harsh compared to those of his imagination.

Oh, the come-down sucks. He's sticky, his head hurts, and he's too exhausted to resist the pull of regret: alone and left to marinate in drying jizz and self-reproach as he wonders if Dazai will remember to eat his lunch.

The sudden realisation that the door isn't locked hits Chuuya like a brick wall, and he just about dies from mortification. Through the out-of-body experience of it, he swiftly pulls himself to his feet, grapples for the first piece of stray fabric he finds on the table and wipes the physical manifestation of his crimes off his hand, *aggressively*. He wants to keep rubbing until he sees blood, and the only thing that stops him is the sad knowledge that no amount of deep-cleaning will make him feel less dirty.

---brrrrr---

The low buzz of his phone's vibration rouses Chuuya from his meltdown. He fishes it out of his pocket, finds a message from Yosano:

Hi Chuuya. I'm sorry for backing out so last minute, but then again, I'm not all that sorry because I'm sure you're more than happy with the replacement I found for you.

Happy? Chuuya lifts a hand to his heart, its steady drag whining under his touch: *no no no,* it seems to say.

No, indeed. The Dazai-shaped hole in Chuuya's chest hurts too much to be called by the innocent name of happiness. Still, he will choose pain again and again if choosing pain means choosing Dazai.

Chapter End Notes

Wordy chapter is very wordy and it fought me every sentence along the way, but at least it got kind of emotional toward the end? Hopefully?

Thank you so much for reading my gay little fic, I appreciate it so much *sniff* 💕
I love kudos and comments 💗

Chapter 4: Tings Get Messy

Chapter Summary

Dazai makes an awful mess.

Chapter Notes

Hello and welcome to Chuuya's perpetual mental breakdown and Akutagawa's Dazai obsession (same, Aku)

Thank you so much for all the comments. You are all so lovely 💕

Hope you enjoy this chapter. (It's a long-boi one).

CHAPTER WARNINGS:
- Disordered eating. Mentions of drug use and a reference to self-harm. If you have questions about these warnings, please don't hesitate to send me a message.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Chuuya notices when he steps into his apartment is the scent of vanilla. It's faint under the much more prominent, much more worrying burned smell of dessert-gone-wrong that hangs so heavy in the room that it practically drips from the walls - slides down the wallpaper in the shape of tears, congregating in a lumpy puddle on the floor. Unappetizing and foreboding.

"Dazai?"

No response. Only a silence that echoes with the broken promise of a quiet and peaceful evening.

With a long-suffering sigh, Chuuya kicks off his shoes in the genkan and rids himself of his overcoat. His movements creak inside his bones, and gravity doubles down on him, heaviness seeping through his feet and leaving a trail of exasperation as he pads towards the kitchen.

It's a mess of epic proportions. Pots, pans, bowls and whisks strewed around in a way that reminds Chuuya of a chaotic version of a zen stone garden. Every single surface is powdered with a thick sheen of flour, and smashed eggs with ominously wobbling yolks decorate the floor, forming a neat trail from the pantry to the kitchen island.

Despite moving on careful feet, Chuuya steps in something as he enters. Something gooey. Some kind of cake-mix, he supposes. The glue-like substance squelches uncomfortably under his foot, clinging to his overpriced designer socks.

It's truly a disaster zone. And in the eye of the storm, slap-dab in the middle of the kitchen-catastrophe is a rather catatonic-looking Dazai – sitting on the kitchen counter with his legs dangling over the edge as he stares straight ahead, unblinking. He's shoving big bites of… whatever it is he has been making into his mouth, barely chewing before he swallows. Next to him is a bottle of sake but no glass. So... straight from the bottle, it is.

It's not entirely unlike Dazai to have a sneaky little pre-dinner drink, but for him to *eat* so unrestrictedly, he must either be in an exceptionally good mood or an exceptionally bad mood. Judging by the vacant look in his eyes, Chuuya rather thinks it's the latter – a pouring sugar into fresh wounds sort of situation.

"Dazai?" he tries again, keeping his tone soft-tempered despite the worried annoyance that tightens around him like a too-small belt. "What's going on here?"

One of those rare, reluctantly defenceless I-refuse-to-answer-that-question-on-the-grounds-that-I don't-know-the-answer looks flit across Dazai's face.

Still no verbal response. Still only a quietude that's even stickier than the sugary batter that's stuck under Chuuya's feet.

But then – "do you want a pancake?" Dazai's eyes are wide and almost pleading behind the very smudged windows of his glasses as he picks up a lump of something that neither has the right shape or colour to be called a pancake and holds it out to Chuuya.

A delicate little spring unwinds inside Chuuya, and he bursts into laughter.

As much as Chuuya wants to claw his skin off in frustration at the state of the kitchen (and his head, and every other space that Dazai colonises), he can't help but find it all exceedingly comical. He can't quite decide if finding humour in tragedy is a sign of character growth or some indication of how skewed his perspective tends to be whenever Dazai is involved, but in any case, he feels light and airy when he says, "tempting, but I'll pass. Call me picky, but I have this weird food rule where I only eat foods that look and smell like the

foods they're supposed to be."

Dazai huffs, stuffs the entire thing in his mouth, and grunts something that's difficult to parse, what with his mouth being full, but if Chuuya had to guess, it's an indignant 'you're missing out'.

Despite the entertaining absurdity of the performance, there's something very broken about Dazai eating alone with a look on his face that says he's as miserable as his food – that eating alone tastes like melancholia. A sour taste swallowed down with alcohol.

An itching feeling at the very tips of Chuuya's fingers tells him to reach out, touch Dazai, maybe even give him a hug.

Instead, Chuuya leans against the counter, "So-" an informal conjunction made of thin breakable fibres; soft, and sensuous, and screaming tenderness... and probably not strong enough to connect to the points Chuuya wishes to make: "Nervous about tomorrow?"

"No." Dazai offers utterly unhelpfully, no slits to split or cracks to claw.

And it's almost definitely a lie. But calling Dazai out on it will only make him more defensive, so all Chuuya can do is pretend to believe it until Dazai is willing to deny it.

Chuuya rolls his head, and something makes a cracking sound, which seems mighty fitting for the mood. "Just so we're clear," he waves a hand, gestures at the general disorderliness, "I'm not helping you clean all of this up."

It gets Dazai's attention enough to drag him out of the daze he's in, head slowly lifting, pout in place. He blinks slowly and lets out a theatrical sigh. "What kind of friend are you, Chuuya? I can't believe I have to do everything myself."

"You don't have to do *everything* yourself," Chuuya points out, daringly ghosting a hand through the messy space between them – the burned coping mechanisms, the flour-covered feelings, the sugar-coated affection – to grab Dazia's hand, squeeze lightly.

At that, Dazai tilts his head, delicate features scrunching into confusion.

It makes Chuuya want to do unspeakable things. Like cupping Dazai's stupidly pretty face with both hands and squishing his cheeks.

With a little exasperation and a lot of affection, he seizes the soggy paper plate of dough-monstrosities (which Dazai so generously refers to as ‘pancakes’) in one hand and tugs lightly on Dazai’s wrist with the other. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?” Dazai’s eyes slant with the apprehension of someone who thinks that ‘come on’ is the overture to an abduction.

“Just to the living room. I wanna sit down somewhere clean and comfy.”

Of course, Dazai, being the mercurial little imp that he is, can’t just go along with a good idea without at least a little bit of protest. “Actually, I need a shower.” He sounds uncharacteristically on-edge as he tries to slink out of Chuuya’s hold.

The escape attempt is unsuccessful because Chuuya is the hook to Dazai’s slippery-little-eel tendencies, and he doesn't let go. “The shower can wait.”

“Chuuya can wait.”

It’s hard not to dignify that kind of childishness with an exaggerated eye roll. “Can I? When have you ever known me to be patient?” he asks, mostly for the banter and rhetorics of it, and then gently – or maybe not all that gently – shoves Dazai along and pushes him into the couch.

With a satisfactory heaviness that deflates the sofa cushion, Chuuya plonks down next to Dazai. He wiggles around until he’s settled properly – legs folded into a cross-legged position and the meagre pile of pancakes perched on his lap.

“Okay, let’s try one of these.” Chuuya picks up a pancake and takes a tentative bite. It’s an overall unpleasant culinary experience. In terms of consistency, he might as well have taken one of those glue guns he sometimes uses to secure patches to clothing, put the nozzle in his mouth and squeezed the trigger. The extreme sweetness that blooms on his tongue as he starts chewing does little to make up for the awful mouth-feel, but it does make his teeth itch enough to distract him a little.

Dazai observes the taste-testing with a puffed out chest, and a rather sardonic chin jut. “You’re breaking one of your food rules.”

It’s an unfair judgement considering Dazai is the one who constantly

pushes Chuuya to rewrite his principles, and all Chuuya can say is, “maybe I just changed my mind.”

“You do that a lot.”

“Only for you.” A confession that propels out of Chuuya’s mouth, inner turmoil turned into a tornado of truth, which sweeps the room and has Dazai’s breath hitching and time pause to let Chuuya catch up…

When he does, it’s with the realisation that he needs to get to say something meaningful before the moment passes.

“Okay, listen,” Chuuya starts and immediately cuts himself off, uncertain of how he’s supposed to break the news to Dazai that what he’s feeling is indeed nervousness.

The thing is: Dazai doesn't tend to take well to having his personality recounted to him, but he certainly is one to deny his social malaise, even when it’s evidently there. It’s there in the way he has to rely on social cues derived from chunky textbooks like *Mammalian Behavioural Neuroscience*.

It’s there in the way his eye contact gets inconsistent, gaze either flickering around the room like moths or honing in on their target with an intensity that burns holes through the thin-skinned. It’s there in the way his voice raises an octave, and his laughter squeezes through the too-tight straw of his anxiety-strained vocal cords, taking on a hysteric edge. It’s there in the way he keeps scratching his arms as though invisible bees are crawling all over his skin.

Although Chuuya’s anxieties have very different roots and manifestations, he can still see his own reflection in Dazai’s brave-but-raggedy performance of normality, and he recognises it for what it is; deep, soul-wrenching angst born of alienation. The utter horror of being cut open and found revolting.

“Oi?” Dazai snaps his fingers, effectively pulling Chuuya out of his impromptu existential spiral. “You asked me to listen, and then you spaced out.”

“Sorry.” Just to have something to do, Chuuya unfolds his legs, one knee crossing over the other. He taps the air with his foot, sets a steady rhythm for the conversation ahead as he slips into his best explanation voice – the one with a sweet edge that makes everything he says sound convincing. (He’ll need it if he wants to reach through

Dazai's lost-at-sea-ness without rocking the boat of denial.) "So, what I'm trying to say, is that whatever you're feeling is perfectly normal and okay." He hopes the vagueness mellows out the accusation Dazai will no doubt find in what is supposed to be a comfort.

It seems to work well enough. At least Dazai doesn't immediately jump to defences. He simply nods, eyes fixing upon an invisible horizon beyond the confines of the room, thousand-mile stare searing holes through the wall. "I'm not feeling anything, though. I'm just… tired."

Although the definition of being 'tired' is considerably different between the two of them, Chuuya can empathise with that.

"That's okay too." Chuuya gently parts the space between them, hand landing on Dazai's shoulder, tension vibrating under the touch.

When it comes to this particular subject – the not really feeling part of the human scene subject – Chuuya knows Dazai is more likely to communicate through mutilated flesh than he is to do it through words, so guardedness aside, the conversation is going splendidly simply by virtue of it happening at all.

And Chuuya doesn't think Dazai is actively lying about his feelings. Rather he's probably too disconnected from them to register anything against the background noise of nihilistic disquietude. The signal-to-noise ratio isn't big enough. Or maybe it's too big – too much of an outlier for him to pay attention to. Chuuya isn't quite sure how a scientist would conceptualise that sort of thing.

But to Chuuya, Dazai's twitchy, stressy, nervy reactions make the type of perfect sense that goes hand-in-hand with perfect solutions. It all clicks in that inevitable way – like a gold buckle, fastening two loose ends.

"I know you," Chuuya murmurs, a reminder and a promise.

Dazai offers a lopsided smile. "Uh-huh. And *I* know what you're thinking. You think you can sweep in and fix my bad day.

"Not to be full of myself, but yes, I think I can fix your bad day."

A subtle snort escapes Dazai's mouth as he lifts a hand to cover his mouth. It's not a laugh, not even close, but it is an indication that he's present. That he's listening.

Chuuya knows he shouldn't break the key off in the lock, but there's no way around it. Dazai isn't likely to gain insight unless he's challenged by a batch of unsolicited constructive criticism.

So Chuuya picks his words carefully, selects them with the utmost care from his vocabulary and combines them to construct the most non-threatening version of a confrontation he can think of. "Remember that time you had to give a speech at the welcome ceremony for new students."

"No." Flat. Brittle. Quiet. And Dazai holds on to his mask of aloofness by the fingernails, but the paint is cracking under his grip, slowly peeling off his face. At this point, the best option is probably to rip it all the way off and hope it doesn't sting too much.

So Chuuya takes a deep breath and splutters on the exhale, "yes, you do. You wish you didn't because it went horribly wrong, but you do."

"Went perfectly fine," Dazai insists, stubborn to the core. He stares straight ahead with a hard look and a little sniff. "It was… memorable. Everyone had a great time."

"The way I remember you recounting it to me, it didn't sound like *you* had a good time."

"I can admit that agreeing to be the first human test person to one of Fyodor's clandestine alpha-methylphenethylamine synthesization experiments right before getting on the podium in front of the entire year was a questionable decision. And yes, those pills did affect me in unexpected ways, and yes, it was mildly embarrassing, and yes, I did consider changing my name and moving to another city, but most everyone has forgotten about the part where I tried to take off my clothes, so it's fine."

He doesn't sound like he thinks it's fine. At all.

"Right," Chuuya sinks further into the cushion, snakes an arm over the backrest and slowly, ever so inconspicuously, drapes it around Dazai's shoulder so they're leaning against each other in a half hug. Which is fine because friends can hug.

He doesn't know why his blood pressure whooshes in his ears as though it's trying to tell him that things aren't fine. At all.

Perhaps, the serious conversation has intensified the consequences of simple affection? Or maybe Chuuya's pitiful heart is just looking for

excuses to puncture itself and gush all over Dazai.

It's the age-old realisation that hits Chuuya like a new fashion-trend of an epiphany every single day: love hurts.

"Y'know," Chuuya's voice is surprisingly rough to his own ears. "I think there's a lesson to be learned from your almost-perfectly-fine presentation experience. Which is-"

"Responsible drug-use, yes I know," Dazai chirps, head tilting to shoot Chuuya close-up smile. There's a sweet superficiality to it that Chuuya supposes does speak of knowing – a knowing without understanding.

It makes Chuuya want to pencil out his point in more detail, but if his experience as a designer has taught him anything, it's that he tends to get lost in details, so he lets it rest.

"Hey." Chuuya elbows Dazai in the ribs, protruding bones cut by glass colliding with awkward affection – the kind of collision that's likely to leave both sides scarred.

Still, Dazai leans into it, resting his head on Chuuya's shoulder. "Hey yourself."

"Can I come?"

"Why would you?"

"To cheer you on. You don't have to look at anyone else as you speak. You can just imagine you're giving me a private lecture."

"That's going to be so boring for you." Dazai's tone is unnervingly matter-of-factly despite the glaring lack of accuracy. And the truth only gets more distorted when he adds, "You don't care about the enzymatic basis of psilocybin's biosynthesis."

It's an interesting self-handicapping deflection. A barricade with the words 'if I minimise my work first, you don't have to do it' painted across it in red graffiti. Imposing in its sneery dismissiveness, but in the end, it's a hindrance made of styrofoam – easy for Chuuya to knock over with a, "have I ever given the impression that I'm not interested in your research?"

That seems to be the answer-in-question that has Chuuya passing the difficult test of trust. And the reward is so sweet: Dazai angling his head to look up at Chuuya with eyes that even a compass could get

lost in. His facial muscles twitch, a smile slowly settling on his lips. “Thank you,” he says, and even if it doesn't exactly settle the conversation, it still settles comfortably inside Chuuya.

The pleasant feeling could do with an overlay of excessive sweetness, so he reaches for another pancake.

It still tastes awful, but there's a certain charm to the gooey consistency, and it reminds him of Dazai – his marshmallow who holds himself together with whatever means; bandages like scaffolding and intellect like glue.

Chuuya swallows. Puts another bite into his mouth. Chew-chew-chews.

The natural light pouring in through the windows slowly fades as the last blues turn into the lovely oranges and pinks of a tired sun. It wraps itself into the silken night robe of sunset and gets ready to go to bed as the twilight slowly spreads out against the sky.

The atmosphere is a dense and warm blanket embellished with comforting silence, and it’s only disrupted by Dazai’s snore-like breathing, the occasional nonsensical murmurings breathed into Chuuya’s neck.

It’s charming enough that it makes Chuuya question the authenticity of Dazai’s nap – suspect it’s a device to avoid further conversation.

There’s a bit of drool pooling at the corner of Dazai’s mouth, though, and that seems a little too embarrassing to fake. So as the wetness seeps into his collar, Chuuya concludes that there is nothing more beautiful than a sleeping Dazai covered in flour, his own saliva, and with the evening sun skipping across his cheeks.

Chuuya’s eyelids are heavy, and daydreams that want to turn into nightdreams pull at his strings, singing a lullaby of *'sometimes you end up where you need to be even if you take a few detours'*.

“I did get my quiet and peaceful evening after all,” He mumbles into Dazai’s hair. And then, not expecting a response, but still needing to get it out there, “marshmallow? When I wake up tomorrow, and I walk in to the kitchen to make my morning coffee, I expect everything to be spotless.”

A groaning noise that confirms that Dazai’s subconscious has picked up on the request vibrates between them, and it’s the buzz-of-Dazai

that carries Chuuya the last bit into sleep.

He plunges into dreams of being swept away by a tide that takes him to Dazai's mouth, hands him back down to Dazai's palm where he belongs – dreams of waking up in Dazai's grip.

♡♡♡

"Okay, I think that's it," Chuuya slips one last pin into the seam.

Dazai looks down at himself, "I like that you shortened it." He twists his body subtly from side to side, the satin chemise draping elegantly over his stomach and hipbones, swishing with the motion. "Shows off my thighs."

Indeed. Chuuya could write sonnets about the way the wine-red fabric stands out against the white of Dazai's bandages; the way it cuts off right at the squishiest point of his endless legs. "Careful. Don't move around too much. You could stab yourself with a pin, or worse – tear the fabric," he says instead of breaking into song.

"You care more about an unfinished dress than you care about me? Ouch."

It's ironic of Dazai's to act all hurt by a throwaway comment that won't even leave a bruise when Chuuya is bleeding out from unrequited love.

But in the name of professionalism, Chuuya pretends to be unbothered and moves on. "I adjusted that lingerie set from yesterday. Can you put it on and check if it fits properly now?" He spins around and gathers the samples up from his desk, traitorous hands trembling as though they're holding an offering to a deity. The imagery resonates deep within Chuuya. Oh, how he wants to worship Dazai. He wants to–

To clip that inappropriately unwelcome line of that thought, Chuuya grunts out loud and all but throws the heaps of silk and lace the last bit of way, aiming right for Dazai's chest.

Dazai catches the throwball offering with fast reflexes and an equal parts amused and affronted look on his face. "Chuuya? Careful?"

"I uh, yeah. Sorry. I just..."

"Got bitten by one of those pesky 'I just thought of something I wasn't

supposed to think about' bugs."

"Something like that, yes."

In a flurry of tingling laughter and red satin, Dazai spins around and disappears out of sight to get changed, leaving Chuuya behind to stew in his embarrassment and racing thoughts.

As his vision slides out of focus and the world doubles, he returns to the inevitable conclusion that this whole 'working with Dazai adventure' is turning out to be a particularly excruciating quest in his doomed falling-in-love-with-his best-friend arc.

The only solace to be found in the pool of pain is that at least Chuuya is good at what he's doing. His yearning is as refined as his embroidery skills – as precise as his eye for detail.

He has turned his fatally flawed feelings into an art piece.

And life imitates art. Just like the golden rays of morning sun that pour through the windows to create a dreamy shadow play, and the fresh flowers on Chuuya desk that wrap the room in the smell of spring and remind him of Dazai even more than Dazai himself does. Long stems. Long legs. Delicate petals. Delicate psyche. Effortless beauty.

When Dazai reemerges, wrapped up in pastel lingerie and looking nothing short of ethereal, Chuuya's condition only gets into more fatal territory. Dazai sashays gracefully across the floor as though he's swimming through clouds of honey. Weightless, floating. His eyes lock with Chuuya's.

For a moment, time stops, and nothing happens.

Nothing continues to happen while the thread of eternity stretches thin...

… And then Dazai cuts it with the scissor of his cheerful lilt: "So what do you think, Mr. Fashion?"

Chuuya opens his mouth. Closes it again. Finally finds the words to speak over the emotions thick in his throat. "It fits perfectly. You look beautiful."

The pink dust that settles on Dazai's cheeks is about as subtle as a feather boa. It tickles every single one of Chuuya's senses and

demands that he finds something to do with himself before he sneezes or confesses his undying fucking love or something equally mortifying.

So he squats down and reaches for the garter (and because Chuuya is someone who lives and learns by his experiences, he finds the wisdom and grace to avoid more altercations with Dazai's assets by keeping a decent distance).

Slowly, he slips a finger under the garter strap. Pulls. Let's go. It snaps back in place with a satisfying smack. Elastic slapping bandages.

"Ouch," Dazai whines from somewhere above. "Does Chuuya have a thing for hurting me? How kinky."

The words fall from above and drench Chuuya in a cold sweat. "Shut up. I was just-" Chuuya takes a moment to analyse the situation before him, remember what exactly is going on, "- was just checking the elastic band for strength."

"That's what they all say," Dazai winks exaggeratedly, mouth opening and all.

The snarky reality-check – the 'that doesn't even make sense' – waiting on the tip of Chuuya's tongue dies out when an aggressively loud knocking sound bursts the bubble of their chitchat.

The door swings open with unnecessary force, and without invitation, Akutagawa makes a grand entrance. He's dressed in black from top to toe, layers of intricate frills falling in cascades over his modelesque physique and black platform boots raising him to intimidating heights. He looks like the silhouette of a weeping willow tree.

There's an austere aura about him, that good old rigidly puritanical poise as he folds his hands behind his back and takes in the surroundings with a judgemental eye. "You've decorated your space tastefully, Chuuya-kun." It is about as high a compliment as Chuuya could ever hope to receive from Akutagawa, so he accepts it with an appreciative nod as he straightens up from his crouching position.

"Thank you. How can I help you, Akutagawa-kun?" he asks, cutting the pleasantries in favour of getting straight to the point. He knows both Dazai and Akutagawa well enough to know that neither man cares for a formal introduction when they can have a gunfight of a stare-down instead. And so, a heavy beat of mutual misgivings drops as the two of them silently suss out each other.

Unsurprisingly, Akutagawa is the first to concede defeat, casting his gaze to the floor. He clears his throat with a sickly rasp of asthma and chronic bronchitis.

When he lifts his head again, his grey eyes are sharp and focused on Chuuya. “All of this is against my will, but I've been told in no uncertain terms that I’m expected to ‘pep up’ my dress designs for this season’s collection. I don’t have that many... *colourful*-” the word sounds like a curse in his mouth. He grimaces and pushes out the rest of his request through gritted teeth. “-fabrics laying around. I was wondering if you had a few rolls I could borrow.”

“Oh, sure.” Chuuya gestures to the bolts of fabric on the cutting table and the ones lined along the wall. “Go ahead. Have a look around. Anything, in particular, you’re looking for.”

When Akutagawa replies with a lost look, Chuuya concludes that he will have to help his colleague step out of the world of monochrome and enter the world of colour. “Do you want my input on how I usually combine colours and textures?”

Akutagawa nods, eyes flitting back to Dazai, elevatoring up and down. “You have quite a talent for colours,” he says in a monotone that makes Chuuya wonder if he’s being sarcastic. But then he wades closer to Dazai, studded-platform-boot-march shaking the room with every step. “This is gorgeous. What fabric did you use for this corset? And what do you call this colour? Peach?” He extends a hand, the tactile need to *touch* good design evident in the slight shaking of his fingers.

But before he gets to glide his fingers down the front panels of the corset, Dazai snatches his wrist and twists it into a joint lock.

Civility’s outer crust cracks and Chuuya watches from a front-row seat as Dazai’s smile distorts into a sneer, brown eyes practically burning red as they turn to slits. “Don’t touch me,” he hisses, low and vicious.

Akutagawa yanks himself out of Dazai’s grip like he has been burned. His eyes dart between his branded wrist and Dazai, gaping and grey-scale-glistening with instant capture bonding. Indelibly marked by the understanding that fire isn’t just beautiful but also dreadfully dangerous.

A smug snake of a feeling coils and rattles inside Chuuya. His greed thrives on the knowledge that he, unlike Akutagawa, gets the special privilege of touching Dazai - of glimpsing inside his velvet bones - without having to pay with third-degree burns.

“We’re done with the fittings for today, aren’t we, Chuuya?” Dazai slides on an agreeable smile that doesn’t do much to hide the murderous intent still lingering in his voice, dripping red and bitter like a fine wine.

And it goes straight to Chuuya’s head (as everything wine-related tends to do), on-the-spot intoxication. It’s an embarrassing reaction that Chuuya doesn’t dare to analyse. He clears his throat and wills the lightheadedness away, directs his muddled focus to the topic at hand.

They’re not actually quite done for today, and ideally, Chuuya would like to keep Dazai around until it’s time to leave for the symposium – walk to the university *together*.

Left alone, Dazai is likely to talk himself into a labyrinth without an exit and get lost in a tangled web of rumination. Throwing Dazai to the crazy-making logic of his performance anxiety is neither conducive to his mental health or presentation skills, but...

But Dazai has an itchy trigger finger on the ‘I can’t do this anymore’ button, and Akutagawa’s presence has quite obviously pushed it.

So Chuuya will let Dazai have an easy excuse to casually walk away before his panic forces him to run away. “Yeah, we’re done.”

Dazai pointedly pushes his glasses further up his nose, clicks his heels together, and then spins around to disappear behind the shoji screen.

“I-” Akutagawa blinks, eyes snapping, two sparks that glow in the smoulder of the empty space Dazai has left behind.

It’s easy enough for Chuuya to relate to his dumbstruck-ness, so he reaches out to muss Akutagawa’s hair. Halfway there, he realises that overly-familiar chumminess is likely to get him killed, so he drops his hand by his side. “Let’s go look at colours,” he says and tugs at Akutagawa’s frilly sleeve, soft chiffon rumpling under his touch, clothing as unexpectedly delicate as its owner.

The first fabric Akutagawa imprints on is an indigo blue embroidered velvet. “It’s very pretty. I just wish it wasn’t so… so loud. You know?”

No, Chuuya doesn’t know, and he has absolutely nothing intelligent to contribute to the discussion of ‘fabric loudness’.

On the other end of the room, Dazai slinks along the wall, shoes in hand, as he glides soundlessly towards the door on socked feet. As

unnoticeable and dramatic as a cold wind.

The hurried restlessness says things about Dazai that Chuuya wouldn't even know how to ask. Like how he feels like he has to be on the move to keep up with himself.

It's the type of leavetaking that disguises as less than it is. A velvet crowbar of an escape-tool.

And that won't do. If Dazai thinks he can get away with ghosting out of the room unnoticed, he's dead wrong.

"Hey." Chuuya whirls around and leans against the table, one ankle crossing over the other. Expressly non-threatening. "Everything okay?"

Dazai stops in his tracks, shoots Chuuya a side-way glance, but doesn't turn his body. "I don't know about 'everything', but I'm as okay as anybody else."

"Ah." Chuuya knows a threat of escalation when he hears one, and if he keeps pushing, his well-meaning prompts will bounce back in his face. So he makes the executive decision to take Dazai's luke-warm drivel for the truth and accept that the only thing he gets to hold against will is his own end of the unrequited love-stick. There's power in defeat, and it makes it easier for Chuuya to lean into warm reassurances. "I'll see you in a couple of hours. I'm looking forward to having my mind blown by your research presentation."

A ragged exhale falls from Dazai's lips, and an almost sincere smile replaces the tension. "See you, Chuuya." He follows up with a wink that pulls at Chuuya's heartstrings as much as it pulls at Dazai's facial muscles. "Don't be late."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Chuuya returns, crossing his arms and puffing his chest as though to show off the gold medal of punctuality around his neck.

Except Chuuya owns no such medal, and he does have a history of being fashionably late for the purpose of making a grand entrance. But he's socially aware enough to know when that sort of histrionics is acceptable and when it isn't, and he'd rather eat his favourite gloves than hurt Dazai with theatrical tardiness. "I'll be there. On time."

"Whatever you say," Dazai waves, and with that adieu, he's out the door. Akutagawa follows fresh on his heels with two bolts of dark-blue

fabric tucked under his arm and a, “I’ll be quick to cut out the pattern pieces,” thrown in Chuuya’s direction.

The door clicks shut behind them, the muffled sound of footsteps and a petulant Dazai-sounding, “don’t follow me,” audible above the palpable silence Chuuya has been left in. The rasp of Akutagawa’s voice retorts with something that is lost to distance, but it has a repressed aggressiveness to it, and Chuuya can’t help but laugh out loud. He should make his best friend and best colleague interact more often – he’s sure they will get along splendidly in no time.

The red chemise is neatly folded and placed on top of a little antique piano stool behind the shoji screen. Chuuya picks it up and holds it from the straps, wincing at the wrinkles that the folding has caused. He appreciates Dazai's efforts, though. It’s not like Dazai usually treats clothes with that much care – his closet is a bombardment of mismatching outfits thrown-in haphazardly.

There’s something so meditative about threading a sewing machine. Chuuya deftly places a red thread spool on the pin, takes a deep inhale and commences his favourite ritual. He brings the thread across the top of the machine and through the thread guide, winding it around the takeup lever at the top and then back down towards the needle. The best part is the small euphoria of successfully passing the thread through the small needle eye on the first try. The single-minded focus it requires and the sense of accomplishment it brings.

The next best part is the actual sewing, the rush of creation vibrating through the machine and into Chuuya’s fingertips.

A gentle knock on the door summons Chuuya out of his hyper-focused bliss. He lifts his foot off the pedal, and the sewing machine’s comforting repetitive hum dies with it.

“Already? You’re fast, Aku-”

But the door creaks open and reveals no other than the head of design, Mori himself. He stands in the door opening right on the edge of the lights that pour in from the floor-to-ceiling windows and the relative darkness of the shadows cast by the room. Illuminated by mystique.

The smile on his face is wide enough to connect the lines of his high cheekbones. “Chuuya-kun, darling.” He glides into the room with the same mysterious lightness that Dazai possesses, practically levitating

above the floor as the red scarf around his neck swishes from side to side with his steady gait. Chuuya can't decide if he's intimidated, fascinated, or mildly creeped out by the strange otherworldliness of his boss.

"Mori-san," Chuuya pushes his chair back and stands up. Adds a perfunctory head dip.

A bony, pale hand stretches out, fingers twisting in the red satin tracing the newly sewn seamlines. "Pretty," Mori comments, monosyllabic and blasé. It doesn't sound nearly as complimentary as a compliment ought to, but Chuuya is a bit of a validation-snatcher, and he'll accept even half-hearted praise with humble grace. "I'm glad you think so. My vision for this collection is to depict the wonder and whimsy of nature and organic shapes. The other day I went to the park with a friend, and we spent a good hour just looking at the koi in the pond. This particular piece is inspired by the way fish glide through water. The s-"

"Yes, that's lovely, Chuuya-kun," Mori interrupts, sounding the very opposite of interested.

And just like that, Chuuya realises that he needs to focus his sales talk more on consumer needs and less on artistic visions. "The dress drapes beautifully – light and flowy like a fishtail, and it looked absolutely stunning on the fitting model."

"Ah yes," Mori says, a low hum of approval replacing his patronizing disinterest and colouring the edges of his tone with a dark-themed palette. "How are things going with Dazai?"

"... Fine," Chuuya says, suspicion slowly trickling in. "How do you know his name?"

The slight flare of Mori's nostrils whisks his face into a smile that's actually more of a smirk, and while Chuuya is at least half-convinced his boss is trying to act cordial and relaxed, all Chuuya sees is a predator who has smelled blood.

"Oh." Mori waves a hand, and it brushes against the grain of built-up tension.

"Oh?" Chuuya repeats, full of poorly suppressed horror. If there's one thing he's good at, it's dressing himself, but he gets the distinct sense that he has walked into a conversion he's woefully underdressed for; bad vibes rain, and he doesn't own a raincoat.

“Thought he had a lot of potential as a model, so I signed him. I’m sure he’ll be doing editorials in no time.”

Chuuya’s fists tighten into sour claws of nausea as he throws respect-for-his-superiors and propriety to the wind and starts asking the questions that burn in his stomach. “Doesn’t the recruitment department usually take care of that sort of thing?”

“They set up deals with modelling agencies, yes, but they don’t headhunt new talent.” Mori raises a perfectly trimmed eyebrow.

A chill of utter wrongness falls over Chuuya, soaks him in fear. “And where did you find Dazai? How exactly did he end up in your office, Mori-san?”

“A-ha, you see,” Mori says, lips pursing as though he’s suppressing a leer, eyes fixing Chuuya in a death sentence. “He found his way there all on his own. My dear nephew has the keycard to my office.”

The dots connect with the spark of an ignited stick of dynamite, the fuse sizzling toward explosion: Mysterious millionaire uncle. Dazai’s unwillingness to talk about said uncle.

It all makes sense, and the natural conclusion hits Chuuya like a concrete wall. His position at Mori Designs isn’t merit-based but rather a partisanship-ish keep-it-in-the-family favour, and Chuuya’s entire career is built on one of Dazai’s expertly crafted lies – so elaborate that if it falls apart, everything comes crumbling down with it.

Shock makes Chuuya’s vision blur at the edges, and the room starts spinning. He barely manages to squeeze his confusion through his mouth as a gasped rendition of, “ne-phew?”

Nephew. Chuuya finds it almost hysterical how one little word can dig into the dodgy underpass of his perpetual identity crisis; the imposter; the poor kid who got into fashion school on scholarship; a mess moonlighting as a confident professional.

“Oh. Oopsie, that’s right. You didn’t know.” Mori lightly taps a finger against his forehead, but the thud with which it lands speaks of no polite uncertainty – just the rigid, hideous fact. “Dazai did tell me explicitly not to tell you about our connection. How forgetful of me to block that out.”

The wheezing quality of Chuuya’s exhales buzzes so loudly in his ears that he can't hear his own thoughts over his attempts to re-learn how

to breathe. Only disjointed fragments of a mental breakdown float around in his head, gravity threatening to pull them together into a big whimpering bang.

And Chuuya can't let that happen. He can’t fall apart in front of his boss. His dignity will never let him live it down – will keep him awake and torture him for every living moment for the rest of his life if he does.

So he leans into the sturdy exoskeleton of his stubborn pride, the virtue and vice he can always count on to hold him together when everything else falls apart.

With sweaty hands of desperation, he clutches the edges of the sewing table. “No, he-” Chuuya swallows the rising bile, shakes his head, “-Dazai never told me.”

“Yes, I'm aware. That's what I just said.” Mori chuckles, and it has an evil ring that makes the hairs at the back of Chuuya’s nape rise. An icky sensation that’s only intensified when Mori sways closer, laying an ice-cold hand on Chuuya's shoulder. “He should have told you long ago. I can’t fathom why he insisted on keeping it a secret, but you know what Dazai is like. He does tend to get strange ideas stuck in his head. He was always such a... *sensitive* boy, if you know what I mean. Very fragile psyche.”

“Sensitive... Yeah,” Chuuya croaks, the sand-paper quality of it scratching his tongue.

“I’ll leave you to your designs, love.” Mori says, oblivious, unbothered or simply uncaring about Chuuya’s distress as he bites the matter off with a polite smile and snaps a sharp salute. “I’m looking forward to seeing what else you’ll come up with. It’s looking splendid so far. I knew you wouldn't disappoint.”

The second Mori is out the door, Chuuya falls to the floor for the second day in a row. It’s becoming a terrible habit, and it’s always Dazai’s fault. This time Chuuya doesn’t find comfort in knowing he has fallen and can’t fall any further. The hardwood flooring doesn't feel like safe ground as much as it feels like quicksand dragging him further and further into despair, that one thought ringing in his mind like an endless echo. *His career is based on a lie.*

Something presses behind Chuuya’s lids, and he fears it might be the promise of tears. He digs his nails into his slacks with the intention of clawing them to ribbons.

“Thanks for letting me borrow these,” Akutatagwa kicks the door open and barges in with the two bolts of fabric under his arm. “Can I have that model's name? I’d like to book h-” he stops in his tracks when his eyes land on Chuuya.

Chuuya doesn’t get the chance to explain the rather embarrassing position he's in – crying on the floor on his second day as a senior designer. He knows what it looks like. It looks like he can’t take the heat. Like he’s weak. Like he’s not cut out for the job.

Everything is heavy, and he isn’t sure he has it in him to dust himself off, rise to his feet and pretend he’s fine, but he’s willing to die trying.

But before Chuuya even gets the chance to lay the first brick in his wall of defence, Akutagawa drops the two rolls of fabric, whirls around and leaves just like he arrived: Unannounced.

Which is fine. Chuuya would much rather be alone to try to sort out the tangled threads of his yarn-ball thoughts.

He’s just about to find the last reserves of energy to crawl across the room and lock the door when Akutagawa returns with a glass in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

Through the mist that clouds his vision, Chuuya manages to squint enough to make out a ‘Petrus 1989’ slung in cursive across the label.

A whirlpool of questions waves inside Chuuya. The first to leave his mouth is, “where did you get a Petrus from?”

“My office, duh.”

“I’ve shared an office with you, and I never noticed you hiding vintage wines.”

“I’m good at hiding things,” Akutagawa replies flatly.

“Oh.” Chuuya nods. Akutagawa does seem like he could hide an elephant and a half up one of his poofy, ruffled sleeves. But there's a more pertinent question left unanswered, “okay, but *why* do you have a Petrus hidden in your office?”

“For emergencies.” Akutagawa pierces Chuuya with a look so profoundly sympathetic that it almost makes his stone-cut face look gentle. “And you seem to be having an emergency.”

Without prelude, he sits down next to Chuuya, and his glamorous outfit pools around him like a black, voluptuous layer cake. He doesn't give the poor wine a chance to breathe before filling the glass to the rim and forcing it into Chuuya's hand. "Drink," he says – or commands rather.

And well, who is Chuuya to deny an order given so graciously?

So he gulps down enough to make the bitter taste in his mouth taste more like purposeful fermentation and less like realty-bursting failure. At the back of his mind, there's a little voice commenting that misery knows how to swim, so attempting to drown it will do no good, but he pointedly showers that thought with another swig of Petrus.

Chuuya isn't particularly in the mood to talk, but he's even less in the mood to co-exist quietly next to a colleague who radiates a very frazzled kind of concern. "Thanks," he murmurs, lips still attached to the rim on the wineglass, unwilling to part from his singular source of comfort.

He flicks his wrist, the glass tipping and pouring more wine into his waiting mouth. He'd very much like to keep going until he passes out. "Thanks a lot, Akutagawa-kun," he tries again, hoping it will stir the conversation. He lowers the glass for good this time, twisting his head to catch Akutagawa's eyes.

But Akutagawa's eyes don't want to meet; they're set straight ahead, pensive. "I get it," he says, in an almost musical monotone. "You're under a lot of pressure. Especially with your recent promotion."

The need for a cigarette or ten itches under Chuuya's skin. He sighs as though exhaling smoke, imagines the acrid smell searing off the edges of his nerves – imagines unbuttoning his shirt, shaking off a clump of ash onto his chest and pushing his finger against it, smearing it into a dark streak of shame. "I don't mind the pressure. I can take everything Mori throws at me." His teeth grit, and he swallows back a curse. "What I can't take is being made a fool of."

Akutagawa finally twists his head in Chuuya's direction, his expression is placid, but there's a question right under the surface of harsh indifference – a determination that says he won't leave until Chuuya provides answers.

And Chuuya finds himself oddly convinced that his grief will be safe with Akutagawa, so he openly dissects his bleeding heart. Red, red, red as the wine that dulls the pain. "The model you just met. His name

is Dazai, and he's my best friend... and I'm in love with him." A love that pours like unshed tears.

Alcohol sloshes in his stomach, lays on top of his frustration like oil on water, slick and contaminated.

Akutagawa hums – a little sound that cuts creases in the fabric of the moment. "Understandable."

It's a steam-iron effort for Chuuya to smooth out his offence. "*What*? You already have a boyfriend."

"Don't misunderstand me on purpose." Akutagawa's eyes roll, grey turning white as he looks for something – the will to continue the conversation, perhaps – on the ceiling. "I just meant that I relate to your suffering. Love is a terrible thing for us creative types, and I'm sure it treats your delicate feelings way too harshly."

A gruesome snort that's honestly more of a sob gets stuck in Chuuya's mouth. There's something so grotesque about the self-importance of discussing one's sensibilities over a glass of overpriced wine.

But for all it's pickled in pretentiousness, it's also true. The trouble with having an open mind is similar to the problem of having an open heart. Creativity and love share the same curse of vulnerability. Someone - someone as utterly unscrupulous as Dazai - can easily slip inside and mess everything up.

Another swig of wine. Each drop turns to acid inside him, curls around his organs like poisoned ivy. Still, he finds comfort in the taste of bitterness.

The flowers on the desk catch Chuuya's attention. It occurs to him that their heads seem to hang in pity. He looks away. "It gets worse." His usually strong voice stretches thin with tense exhaustion. "I love him, but he drives me absolutely mad. He lied to me – has been lying about- about *everything*."

"Everything is a lot to be lying about."

"Well, everything that matters." It's Chuuya's dramatic way of saying that his career is the crystallized detail that he hinges his life on. The physical proof that he's worthy. "And I-" the held-back tears sting, but he'll sew his eyelids together before he cries in front of a colleague. "I-" Chuuya flounders, and when he finally stops stumbling over his words, he free-falls into the verbal void of the nauseating truth, "I

don’t know what to do.”

If there’s something Chuuya doesn't know what to do about, it’s not knowing what to do. He hates it. He’s a man of action and he’s not afraid to get his hands dirty, but Dazai’s messes have a way of getting into the cracks of a situation and filling them with battered goo. Any attempt to clean up ends up just spreading the chaos around.

Akutagawa grunts and stretches his legs out, his heavy boots gliding against the floor, friction squeaking. “Easy,” he swings his feet from side to side, windshield wiper impatience. “You talk to him.”

Chuuya blinks. He supposes Akutagawa has a decent point, but- “easier said than done. I'm not sure I want to talk to him right now. In case you haven’t noticed, I'm rather upset. I might explode if I-”

“You look more sad than angry, though,” Akutagawa points out. Rather rudely.

To show just how angry he is, Chuuya curls his upper lip into a snarl. It only makes him feel more like bursting into violent sobs.

Sadness makes him feel incomplete, a black hole that’s fuelled by the insecurities that flow through him like a river of corrupted blood. His sensibilities give him a low tolerance of that ugliness. He lives to make things beautiful, but the void inside himself can’t be filled with fine fabrics, pearls, silk, or even the very jewel of his collection of things-that-distract-from-the-ugly-truths-of-life: his ruby-red anger.

Only that sense of belonging he gets from excelling professionally and (fuck it) Dazai can fill it.

But both are apparitions. Esoteric concepts Chuuya can delude himself into thinking he can grasp, but that will turn to diamond dust in his hands when he catches them. Lies that tear and claw at him, leaving him shredded and draped in tattered clothes, feeling as unchic and out of place as the little kid from the slums that still lives inside him.

Chuuya tips the glass. He licks the very last drops into his mouth and draws on those last dregs of Petrus and honesty to admit, “yes, I guess I am more sad than angry. I thought he knew me. I thought he’d know how much I'd hate being treated like a charity case. I never asked for favours.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Akutagawa’s face stays cut in stone, but his tone dips into irritated territory. “If you want me to be able to

give intelligent feedback, you have to provide intelligible explanations."

"I'm not ready to explain." A childish part of Chuuya fears that verbalisation will make his hardships more real, and he's not ready for that. He'd rather wear ugly, unfitted, uncomfortable wool sweaters for the rest of his life than admit that the senior designer title he has to his name is a scam. Underserved.

After an eternal silence, Akutagawa nods. "Here's what I think." His brows bump together, eyes twirling like little hard-working cogs. "Imagine you had a custom-made Kouyou Ozaki suit, you wouldn't toss it out if a seam ripped, would you?"

Chuuya arches a brow, half unimpressed by the question, half grateful for the distraction. A change of topic is welcome. "Obviously not. I'd mend it."

"Yeah. Easy fix. Suppose the fabric splits or wears through. Stitches alone can't fix that."

"Sounds like a job for a patch."

"Hmm." Akutagawa dips his head back. The angle makes the curve of his smile seem slightly smug. "You'd do that? You'd put a patch on a Kouyou Ozaki suit?"

The very hypothetical example toasts the rickety stairs in between Chuuya's emotions and his professional impartiality. "A bit of patchwork is preferable to throwing it out, and also, I actually find repairs kind of charming. Shows the item is well-loved."

Akutagawa pats Chuuya's shoulder. It's decidedly clumsy, but Chuuya kind of has a thing for the cold, skinny, awkward type, so he doesn't mind.

"Chuuya-kun. You don't throw something you love out just because it's broken." Akutagawa says sagely, long, slender fingers digging craters into Chuuya's shirt and attention. "If you can patch a hole, mend a seam, and fix a hem, I think you have the tools you need to fix whatever is going on between you and your boy."

It takes a moment for Chuuya to connect the threads of the mediocre analogy, but when he does, it turns his mind into a reeling spinning wheel.

And his first thought is: how very corny. His second thought is: how very true. “Shit. You’re right.”

“I am.”

Chuuya all but shoots to his feet, the sudden change in latitude sends a wave of lightheadedness crashing down on him, and he almost falls on his face, which is superbly humiliating, but he can't care because he finally knows how to proceed.

Dazai’s betrayal may have worked glass splinters into Chuuya’s skin, ripping and tearing with every micro movement, but Chuuya will drag out every piece – will dedicate his single-minded stubbornness to the task of reassembling them into a two-way mirror for Dazai to take a good hard look at himself and the mess he has made in. And then they’re going to figure out how to fix it. Together.

He leans a hand on the table and sniffs a single time. “I’m going to poke that dirty little liar with a needle, *hard*," he declares, slightly slurred but determined nonetheless, "and then I’m going to talk to him.

Sweet relief in the form of a fool-proof game-plan washes over Chuuya. Everything will be okay.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Hope you enjoyed it 💕

Mori thinks he’s doing the right thing and honestly, he’s probably right. But also at least 50% of his motivation for exposing Dazai like that is that he just likes to set things on fire and watch them burn.

Next chapter: things get messier :3c

Chapter 5: The Happy Prince

Chapter Summary

Dazai does something stupid.

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful butterflies

I hope you're all doing well. This chapter is the part where things get worse before they get better ❤🩹
It's the angstiest this fic is going to get but it's (almost) resolved by the end of the chapter so it's not *that* angsty. This chapter comes with a couple of warnings:
- drugs and lots of talk about drugs.
- referenced disordered eating

Hope you enjoy this one <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The university's welcome hall is an impressive monument of futuristic architecture. Pearly white walls, rounded arches, exposed beams, and enormous orb-like chandeliers hang from the ceiling – glowering in billions of watts like round all-seeing alien eyes. It's a venue with an artistically grand aura to it, and Chuuya can't stop his little designer-head from spinning into a bit of self-indulgent escapism – imagining it being the backdrop for a space-themed haute couture catwalk.

As it is, though, Chuuya is surrounded, not by high fashion, but by a kaleidoscope of heavy perfumes, highfalutin scholarly chit-chat and suits. There's something about how researchers and dark academics alike dress, and Chuuya might be a little charmed by the maroon colour palette and all the thick glasses that reflect the overhead spotlights and turn the room into a disco-ball-prism-party.

Still, he can't allow himself to dwell too much on it when his skin squinches around his bones with every passing second – the *tick-tick-tick* of an almost-broken promise.

'I'll be there. On time,' Chuuya distinctly remembers saying, and he considers his own word of honour to be law. His responsibilities come before his excuses of suffering an ongoing mental breakdown. But alas, here he is, last-minuting around the clock. People are already

trickling into the auditorium, and Chuuya still hasn't found Dazai in the sea of scientists.

“Pst. Chuuya?” An unfamiliar voice drags Chuuya out of his search.

Chuuya spins around, comes face-to-face with a young man with spiky black hair, a smug slant to his smile, and a questionable but bold brown cloak hanging over his shoulders – a brave fashion choice that Chuuya respects.

“Do I know you?” Chuuya arches a brow.

Leaning against a refreshment table and placing his hands by his waist in the majestic manner of someone who owns the universe and its secrets, the man croons, “names Edogawa Ranpo. I’m sure Dazai has told you about me.”

Not really, no. Chuuya looks through his memory with a fine-tooth comb and a rigger brush but comes up empty. “Of course,” he says anyway because he gets the clear-cut impression that this Ranpo-guy considers himself too important to deal with the blow of not being gossiped about behind his back.

It turns out to be a good call – Ranpo’s eyes close into happy little arcs as his smile turns into a florid flashlight, all teeth and delight – it’s essentially an advert for some overpriced dental product. “So what exactly did he tell you? That he’d never met anyone smarter than himself before he met me?”

An objection twitches at the tip of Chuuya’s tongue. In his personal cosmos, Dazai is the ruler of intellect, and the idea of a realm beyond Dazai-level-clever seems incomprehensible. It’s not a point worth arguing, though. Ranpo is quite obviously looking for praise, and Chuuya can empathise with that as much as he can appreciate that the quickest way to get out of this toffee-tosh-chat is to move with the current. “Yeah, that’s pretty much exactly what Dazai said.”

“A-ha-ha,” Ranpo smacks his hands together with a loud clap and the crystal glasses on the table sing with the shrill overtones of it. “He’s a good boy. I’m glad he’s the one keeping my prestigious spot as the highest-grade-average-haver warm after I graduated,” Ranpo rambles, eyes still crinkled into crescent moons. “You’re looking for him, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Chuuya rushes to say, nodding enthusiastically. He’s pleasantly surprised to get anything out of this exchange. “Idiot doesn’t pick up

his phone. Do you know where he is?"

"Of course," Ranpo answers as he reaches for some appetisers, not to take one – but to snag the entire tray. He shoves two onigiris into his mouth and answers while chewing happily. "He left with the guy with shiny hair whose name I could never be bothered to learn."

With a loose flourish to his wrist, Ranpo points to a door at the far end of the room. It's practically part of the wall and completely inconspicuous if not for the bright green 'emergency exit' sign plastered above it. "You should probably hurry," he says with a smile that doesn't match the ominous prophetic message.

There's admittedly a bit of an anxious spring to Chuuya's step as he leaps across the room. He checks over his shoulder twice to make sure no one is watching, then pushes the door open – alert with the repressed misgivings of a sceptic entering a haunted house for a ghost hunt – and lets himself through. It takes a few seconds to adjust to the dingy surroundings, but as his sensitivities settle, a winding tunnel-maze of a corridor unfolds before him, neon-light arrows lining the wall. There's a rather submarine-ish aura to it all, and a lesser-legend than Chuuya would probably succumb to claustrophobia.

With the atmosphere being more stifling than brocade, sounds are muffled and blurred. So Chuuya holds his breath; listens carefully to the echoing voices that sing to him from just around the corner.

"You'll like this one. It's a lot like Alprazolam, but less sedating. It's guaranteed to make you feel so much calmer." The voice is low and hissing, a pitch made of overpriced, scaly snakeskin. *Fyodor*.

"Thanks but no thanks. I don't need your anxiolytics." Dazai's familiar timbre rings. Cheery but thin, teetering on the brink of frailty.

"Why did you come with me back here, then?"

Dazai doesn't answer this time, his hesitation louder than words – stretching thin, a silk thread about to break.

And then Fyodor's sour laughter blares like a scissor. "Your emotional support is late."

"He'll make it."

"Sure about that?" Syrupy smugness sticks to Fyodor's tone, and Chuuya's blood sugar can't take anymore. He makes his steps heavy,

shoes banging against the floor, a pinwheel of an entrance. He rounds the corner with a scowl plastered on his face and hands braced for a fight.

Both Dazai and Fyodor look totally unshaken at Chuuya's aggressive arrival, carefully observing him with tilted heads and similar expressions of mildly amused detachment; masks which look like the product of practice – of mirror sessions spent staring into each other's soulless eyes.

The synchrony makes Chuuya's spine harden into a glaciated stick. He knows Dazai and Fyodor have a history of being lab partners in crime, and he hates to be confronted with the fossil of their dead friend-ship, frenemy-ship, mutually beneficial academic arrangement or whatever name suits their 'thing'.

The two of them are connected by the suspension bridge of their arms: Fyodor's outstretched, a purple pill in his palm. Dazai ready to pick it up.

Honeysuckle anger spreads from Chuuya's core and through his limbs, coils its tendrils around his self-control and smothers his civility.

A dramatic lunch forward and a non-gentlemanly slap to Fyodor's hand sends the pill skidding along the floor. It crumbles so satisfyingly to dust when Chuuya tramps on it with his fancy designer shoe (whose sole is honestly too expensive to see such filth, but oh well, sometimes Chuuya likes getting dirty).

The frown on Fyodor's face strains with indignation. "That was a homemade benzodiazepine compound. Took me hours to perfect the recipe." He purses his lips in the most casually shameless way – as though he's talking about rice pudding and not illegal drugs.

"He said *no*," Chuuya snaps through his teeth, hoping his ire gives the word 'no' the power it ought to have.

And that's when Dazai joins the game with his swiftly changeable moods, a hollow bell of a laugh, and a dazzling vocal-wobble befitting of an opera-singer mid-aria. "Ah, look at that Fyodor-kun, My Chuuya – *my saviour* – made it. Just like I told you he would."

It makes Chuuya's desire to have a levelheaded conversation with Dazai burn to ashes, the smoke of frustration filling his lungs until he can barely breathe. It demands cutting remarks, so he spins around and throws a finger in Dazai's face. "I'm not your guard dog."

“Uh... That’s not what I sa-”

“Not right now.” Shaking his head, Chuuya presses his hand over Dazai’s mouth. “We need to talk, and when I say talk, I mean I’m going to talk, and you’re going to listen.”

Dazai’s eyes narrow to rebellious slits behind his big round glasses, but after just an endless second of a silent power battle, he nods. Not a capitulation as much as a strategic move, Chuuya suspects – use (or misuse) of soft power – but he will take it. He does intend to be civil about the treacherous territory ahead, and not questioning Dazai’s performance of goodwill is a good start.

A sardonic snort alerts Chuuya to the cursed presence of Dazai’s piece of shit ex-lab partner. So he puts on his most squint-eyed demeanour and spins around – bat-style, fluttering coat and all – to deal with *that* misfortune. “Do you think you could go cry over spilt drugs somewhere else? I'd like to have a private conversation with Dazai, but we can't very well have it in your unwelcome company.”

There's a violet glimmer in Fyodor's eyes when he rolls them to the ceiling. “I was complaining about your rude interruption and unnecessary brutality towards me and my dear experiments, not crying.” He reaches a sickly pale hand inside a pocket, pulls out a ziplock bag full of pills in all colours of the rainbow. “Plenty more where that one came from.”

The temptation to give in to the not-yet-shed teenage habit of violence, grab Fyodor by his ill-fitting excuse of a double-breasted suit, drag him out of the emergency exit passageway and on to the podium to kick his ass in front of the pristine crowd of prim and polished university-folks is mighty hard to resist, but if Chuuya wants to conserve nonexistent energy to deal with Dazai, he can’t also be dealing with public fighting matches. In the end, Chuuya settles for a sneer and a dismissive hand-wave. “Didn’t ask. Don’t care. Get moving.”

Fyodor’s answering look is neither impressed nor entertained. He comes across as someone who is so poised to preach that he will stand his ground even when he has nothing to say – just to be a spoiled prince about it. He tilts his head back and glowers in Dazai's direction over the bridge of his nose. “I was just trying to be helpful, but if you really think your brain's hyperactive fear-circuitry can get through the night without a security blanket, that's *fine*... Wait. Let me rephrase: as long as you can reign in your issues enough to deliver when we get on

stage, it's fine.” And on the end of that comforting note, he spins around and swaddles away with an affected bounce to his step and his sleeves *swoosh-swooshing* against the sides of his blazer. The yowling sound of stiff fabric slowly fades to nothing, but the stench of fashion roadkill lingers.

A shrill trill of Dazai’s signature probably-fake laughter bounces off the walls. He sticks his tongue out at Fyodor's retreating back, then turns to Chuuya. “You handle Fyodor well,” he says and reaches up to scratch his head, making a tousled bird’s nest of his hair. “He’s not usually that agreeable.”

“He’s a total ass,” Chuuya butts in, irritation short-circuiting the politeness filter he usually puts on his impulsiveness.

“So true. But he’s also misunderstood – that happens to the best of people.” Dazai shifts from one foot to the other with a soft restlessness. Almost as though he’s afraid the earth might disassemble underneath him any moment. “Anyway, I’m usually pretty good at clapping back at ass-people or misunderstoodies or whoever has the nerve to provoke me, but that’s a lot harder to do when they’re trying to sweeten me with offers I kind of want to accept. So thanks for, y’know-” he flaps a hand, and it creates a wobbling moth-like shadow of the dim illumination, “-setting a boundary for me.”

It’s an openly vulnerable statement, and Chuuya doesn't know how to respond. All he can do is stand there and let it wrap around him – a strange feeling that is as soft and synthetic as viscose...

… mollifying is what it is. Chuuya is floating on the fumes of will-power, and with Dazai by his side as the neutralizing agent, the crash-landing seems inevitable. There’s just something so sobering about Dazai's dishevelled appearance – there under flickering lamplight, caged in by concrete walls, he seems *nervous*. The fact that he chooses to openly display that nervousness through his body language makes Chuuya feel like a sponge dipped in red wine. Heavy and leaky. Full of hangover-love.

Even when Chuuya is disappointed and confused, he’s still drawn to Dazai. Sometimes he wishes he could stop loving Dazai so he could hate him, but no, Chuuya’s disaster magnet of a heart will always want Dazai’s junk-metal personality.

It’s a devotion so well-defined that Chuuya can see every unflattering hi-fi detail of his own smitteness in the reflection of it, and all he can

do about it is shake his head and choke back a sentimental sob. Unguarded-Dazai is a strange concept, and it does unprecedented things to him. “I just wish you would have started being honest earlier,” he lets slip out, an unbidden fact stuck between bitten lips.

“So that’s what this is about.” Dazai sounds more resigned than skittish now, voice wrapped in cool resignation.

It’s so unlike Dazai to summarise an accusation against himself without turning it into a counterargument that Chuuya has to take a moment to blink away his surprise. Dazai just takes the scrutiny in silence as his gaze drops as though he finds his shoes infinitely more interesting than Chuuya’s face. In the end, though, he’s the one to break the silence. “You’re mad at me,” he says, curling himself into a question mark.

“Very mad at you,” Chuuya agrees, and although it’s the truth in its simplest terms, his soft tone drags the weight of his words down to a height that limbos beneath an understatement. Because yeah, at this point, there’s *definitely* no doubt that he’s more sad than angry.

Still, he isn’t here to talk at length about how much he pities himself for having been beaten black and blue by emotions he doesn't want to have. He’s here to fearlessly throw himself into the boiling soup called 'communication' – to get an explanation and hopefully a pretty, colourful band-aid to slap on the worst of his wounds. But- “we’ll talk after your presentation. I don’t want it to distract you.”

“I’m already distracted. You smell like expensive wine, and that seems like a bad sign,” Dazai comments with all the raspy breathlessness of a muted panic attack.

It makes Chuuya want to say something reassuring, but he’s fresh out of words, so instead, he offers a hand for Dazai to get tugged back to the auditorium by.

Quiet frenzy clings to Chuuya’s brain, stickier and grosser than even pancake dough. He plops his bones into an uncomfortable chair and claps perfunctorily at the institute director's self-congratulating rigmarole of a welcome speech.

The first talk is by some big over-educated honcho who has written some mighty revolutionary book – according to himself at least – and Chuuya finds himself spacing out of it entirely.

All of his unsteady attention snaps back online when he hears Dazai's name being announced as the next living picture, though. He holds his breath and watches Dazai sashay onto the stage as a shadow trailing Fyodor’s presence – holds it long enough that his lungs scream at him and his head nearly turns into an air balloon, ready to leave his body.

But when Dazai starts talking, Chuuya can finally melt into his seat with a deep sigh of relief and a sniff of pride at how masterfully – how *charmingly* Dazai handles himself.

Somehow, the magic and wonder Dazai is made of allow him to excel despite his anxious distraction. He delivers like a born speaker; code switches from shy student to professional presenter with the effectiveness of a hyperactive chameleon. Eloquence and wit drip from his mouth as he guides the audience through his research without meeting Chuuya’s waiting eyes a single time.

♡♡♡

Mingling is an artform that Chuuya has perfected over years of practice. The first rule of the fashion industry is having a passionate dedication to the craft, but net-working is a close second. So although there's a fine line between socially outgoing curiosity and phoney ass-sucking, Chuuya has learned to walk that line in a way that’s conducive to both his career and self-respect. Judging from the way researchers, students and other tweed-wearers fall over each other with half-hearted compliments, the world of academia isn’t much different from the world of design.

The only way to navigate the dense crowd of small-talk is to put on a polite smile and pretend to have all the serene patience in the world.

But by the time Chuuya is on his sixth canapé and has scanned the entire room with the obtrusive intensity of a broken dress code, it’s very clear to him that he’s being avoided.

It's just like Dazai to be a fucking coward, and Chuuya is as irritated about it as he’s unsurprised.

Sometimes Dazai’s cat-and-mouse games are fun (until Chuuya remembers that his feelings will never be reciprocated, which – ouch). Right now, though, he fails to find even a slither of humour in Dazai's hide-and-seek match.

He climbs a set of stairs to get a better view of the floorplan, fretfulness bleeding through as he taps his fingers against the railing

and his eyes scramble to take it all in.

It's always right before snapping that fate decides to drop by to patch things up in its ironic ways. Because when Chuuya's vision finally parts the crowd and finds Dazai, he desperately wants to look away. He's blinded by the horrifying unrealness of the melodramatic scene that plays out in front of him: the villain and the other villain conspiring to ruin his respiratory health.

A choked breath is all Chuuya has to offer as he watches Dazai extend a cocktail glass filled with clear liquid to Fyodor as though going in for a toast. A white little speck - *a pill* - inconspicuously snows from Fyodor's sleeve and into the drink. Chuuya is not naive enough to think it's just a vitamin supplement, but he knows that the chances Dazai hasn't noticed that there's a pill swirling around in his glass like a single grain of glitter in a snow globe are right down there at about zero percent.

Except… Dazai lifts his glass, studies it against the soft light of sparkling chandeliers. And something about the square set of his shoulders says he's going to drink it.

Chuuya bolts down the stairs with the stress of already-too-late nipping his clattering heels and an alarm ringing "go, go, go" inside his ribcage. He aggressively parts the crowd of important-looking intellectuals; throws them aside without giving a flicker of a fuck to the insulted huffs that make the soundtrack to his plough-like parade.

It's too late to realise that his 'fool-proof' plan to talk things out has the fatal flaw of failing to account for Dazai's boundless foolishness. But Chuuya storms ahead, hoping his legs can carry him fast enough to outrun the consequences of that mistake.

When he's just one leap away, Dazai meets his eyes, hollow determination pausing time... And then he downs the drink, slurping up every last drop with a desperation much stronger than thirst.

Slimy giggles from Fyodor accompany the catastrophe. "I was right when I said you'd be too late, *Chuuya-kun*." He lingers on Chuuya's name as though it's the punchline to a clever joke.

At this point, Chuuya is well aware that knocking the glass out of Dazai's hand will only serve a symbolic purpose, but he does it anyway; sends it flying across the room to meet the faith of unrequited love – shattering to a billion pieces.

It feels phenomenally cathartic. There's a lot of freedom in fighting a lost battle. "What the fuck, Dazai?" He breaches bandaged boundaries; grabs Dazai's arm tight enough to hurt even through the layers of clothing, gauze and defences, nails digging into already scarred skin. "That drink was spiked, and you knew it."

The guilt Dazai exudes through his slumped shoulders and flickering eye contact is clingy and contagious – drapes over Chuuya's body like a heavy overcoat. He straightens his back under the weight of it, refusing to regret his harshness. "Why did you drink it?" he demands.

"Don't-" Dazai cuts himself off, drifting into an unfocused stare.

It's a shutdown that looks like a conscious choice, and it rattles Chuuya in all the wrong ways. He vibrates with poorly restrained confusion, and it surges from his overheated head, through his arms, and into an attempt to shake some sense into Dazai. He wants to scream, but his vocal cords feel raw, so instead, he slithers his most demanding whisper through the thin line of his lips, "Don't *what*?"

The exhale that falls from Dazai's mouth is broken and doesn't even register as a breeze against Chuuya's forehead.

Chuuya leans back enough to take on the impossible task of reading Dazai's mind through the placid lake of his doll-featured face. Porcelain and obscurity.

He's not really expecting to find answers, but the sparkling radiance from the lights above reflect in Dazai's slack face and shimmer in his eyes, making them look deep and wet. Chuuya knows it's a vision-trick – it has to be because *Dazai doesn't cry* – but his ribcage tight-laces around his lungs regardless.

When he catches his own reflection in Dazai's black-mirror pupils, something deep within him trembles.

So he does what he always does: he abandons his externalised frustration in favour of the old habit of appeasement that his feelings, ever so helpfully, offer to him on a silver platter. It's admittedly a somewhat clunky strategy, but it's the best interpersonal technique Chuuya has at his disposal. People don't scare him the way they do Dazai, but they do get under his skin. When someone wants something from Chuuya (or even more irresistibly, when they *need* something from him), he simply cannot not provide. He's not one to walk past a stray kitten or pass up the opportunity to drive himself into the ground for someone who doesn't deserve his loyalty. People have

expectations of him, and in an attempt to understand and provide for his customers' needs, he responds like an eager investor. It's not a sustainable business model, but Chuuya is too romantically inclined to care about profit anyway, and it does have its share of inbuilt wisdom – makes him want to stop pursuing answers and start chasing after solutions.

And the first step is to get a clear picture of the problem at hand.

So he levels Fyodor with a look of the don't-even-fucking-think-about-lying-to-me variety as he exhales from the very end of his lips, "what did you give Dazai?"

"Dihydrohydroxycodeinone," Fyodor blabbers… as though that's supposed to make sense.

"Impressive economy of language you got there. Now tell me what it does and how to get rid of it. Do I need to... I don't know – take him to the hospital for, uh, a detox or something?"

"No, you clearly don't know what you're talking about," Fyodor comments, mouth curling into a smirk.

A shudder trickles through Chuuya, but it's not his own discomfort this time; it's vicarious distress springing from his handcuff-grip around Dazai's arm.

"I'm fine," Dazai insists in a breathy voice that puts his usual silver-tongued effectiveness to shame.

"Yess-*s*," Fyodor drags out the sibilance into a hiss so slippery it could put a snake to shame. "What I've given him is perfectly safe. It was a low dose, and he hasn't been mixing it with other substances – that was just water in his glass – so he's not in any danger." He places a hand above his heart, taps a few times. "I'd never hurt my favourite classmate."

"That better be the truth," Chuuya snarls and swallows the urge to add an 'or else' at the end of it. (He gets the feeling threats will only delight Fyodor.)

Dazai digs into Chuuya's side with a sharp elbow. "It is. I recognise the pill's taste and effects."

"Isn't he a phenomenon worth a million case studies?" The firm material of Fyodor's suit folds and screeches as he extends a hand to

ruffle Dazai's hair in a decidedly patronising manner. “He’s able to perceive differences in dosage and subtle chemical alterations in opioid alkaloids. Very creepy, and very unfair that he won't tell me how he does it,” Fyodor sneaks a look towards Dazai but keeps his address to Chuuya, “His self-regulation is surgically precise. I bet he could even control his heartbeat if he wanted to. Sometimes I wonder if he’s even human.”

Chuuya feels sick to his stomach. “Don’t talk about him like he’s a lab rat.”

Confusion stutters through Fyodor as a dirty little laugh. “Oh no, I'm against animal experimentation. Rats have feelings too, you know.” He lifts his shoulders into a low-effort shrug. His body language keeps speaking of a worldview that presupposes the immense inferiority of everyone around him – superpositioning between 'actively rude' and 'detachedly amused'.

“So, according to you, rats have feelings, but Dazai doesn’t?” Fury spikes and twists down Chuuya's spine, hands tightening into fists that crush the air molecules in his palms to smithereens.

But despite Chuuya’s spiky temper, Dazai dips his head to make a pillow of Chuuya's shoulder; murmurs softer than a dream. “Always hated it when people talked about me like I wasn't right there in the room with them.”

“I-” Chuuya starts, an apology or an attempt at self-justification on its way. He can’t decide which.

“You don’t have to defend my honour. Can we just leave?” Dazai’s voice is just a little slurred but sharp with good points.

The fight drains out of Chuuya. He can feel the tension pour out of his exhausted muscles like an actual, wet, slippery, tangible thing. A slug, perhaps. “Fine,” he says, and although he’s in the mood to marry his hands to his pockets, he coils an arm around Dazai’s waist for the sake of shared stability. It’s not designed to be a gesture of intimacy, but Dazai collapses into the half-embrace and folds himself around Chuuya, spandex-tight.

“Come on, you absolute chaos demon,” Chuuya snips, squeezing Dazai’s side because he can’t help but cushion his insults so they won't land too harshly. “We're stopping by the restroom, and I’m giving you the choice of sticking your own finger down your throat or have me do it for you.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time I found him with his head in the toilet,” Fyodor comments, and there’s pity in his voice, which sounds more like a jab than a way to sentimentalise the story. “But- ” Fyodor wags a bony finger right in Chuuya’s face, delivering a fatal blow with a purr. “Too late. *Again*.”

That sense of impending doom, which is starting to feel all too familiar, prickles Chuuya's patience. Itchy wool against skin.

Still, he's desensitized enough to Dazai-related catastrophes to reply in a steady tone. “What do you mean?”

Fyodor ever so theatrically pulls down the sleeve on his left arm to reveal a blingy, diamond-studded, no-amount-of-money-can-buy-style watch around his bony wrist. He flicks the display with a nail. Tick tick. “I gave Dazai an immediate-release tablet. Quite proud of it actually, really outdid myself with this formula. It’s faster-acting than anything you can find on the market. The effects set in within 5 minutes – well, at least on an empty stomach. Anyway, you spent that critical window of time chatting to me, so it looks like you just have to wait for his kidneys to break it down and enjoy how pliant he is while it lasts.” He juts his chin, gazes down at Chuuya over his nose, eyes sparkling with excitement as though he’s expecting an applaud for turning Dazai into a good-natured puppet.

Instead of a standing ovation, Chuuya offers a scowl. He’s about to serve it with a homemade side dish called ‘long string of curses’, but then Dazai giggles into his shoulder, and it sounds entirely too unguarded, too inappropriately naked, to exist in a public place.

The sound is more potent than any drug, and it does prodigious things to Chuuya’s poor body. As though he hasn’t been through enough in the name of love, now he aches with conflicting impulses, the strongest of which telling him to turn himself into a cotton ball to match Dazai’s softness. But...

But someone’s going to have to draw the solid lines; provide the shape and texture to Dazai’s presence as he slips from the harsh grip of reality-tested existence. He’s already wobbly, conquering more and more of Chuuya’s space, leaning into it with an effortless shamelessness that suggests he thinks it’s rightfully his to occupy.

So Chuuya hardens his edges, casts one last dirty look in Fyodor’s direction before heading for the exit, hauling Dazai along with as much elegance as possible – which isn’t much what with the way

Dazai clings to him with limbs of deadweight bonelessness. It's like waltzing around with a mannequin.

There's an irony to it which Chuuya can neither pinpoint with accuracy nor find the inner grace to appreciate.

A short woman in a security uniform narrows her eyes as they pass. "Everything okay?" she asks in a low tone of professional severity, blue lipstick wrapping coldly around her words. The narrow tinted glasses perched on her nose obscures her eyes, but the angle of her head makes it clear that she's addressing Dazai.

Dazai's reflexes must be too sluggish to catch the question because he just stands there. And smiles. Cute and utterly unhelpful.

That leaves Chuuya to pick up the slack, and while he's a good improviser, he isn't a good liar. His over-enthusiastic, "yeah, everything's good," sounds as artificial as a rhinestone posing as a diamond and leaves a bitter aftertaste of embarrassment in his mouth. So to mouthwash away the awkwardness, he plasters on his best law-abiding-citizen smile.

Of course, Dazai has to go and notice Chuuya's trepidation – recognise every twitch with the precision of an encyclopedia of microexpression – even in his half-inebriated state. He traces the side of Chuuya's face with a fingertip as though he's trying to commit the feeling of Chuuya's skin to tactile memory. He dips his head, whispers conspiratorially. "Being natural is such an irritating pose. I get it. I know."

The security guard's hands come up to frame her waist in a power pose of scepticism.

And that's when Dazai finally decides to speak up. "It's the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Zilch sinisterism going on here. We're good. All is grand." His movements are only a little uncoordinated when he lifts a hand to pat Chuuya's hair. "Just really sleepy. So my friend's taking me home… cuz we live together." It's not the most intelligent thing Dazai could say, but the security guard nods as though she's convinced, so it appears to be good enough. The tight line of her painted lips even soften as she gestures for them to move along.

"Just a tip," Chuuya says and sways a little closer, drops his voice an octave. "See that guy in the ill-fitting suit over there by the champagne tower?" he points to Fyodor with his free hand. "Might

wanna check his pockets."

"I see. Have a good night," she replies, it sounds more perfunctory than polite, and she's already gliding towards her target with the determination of a missile.

"Good night to you too," Chuuya calls after her. He puffs his chest and does his best to impersonate an inflatable life-jacket: tightens his hold around Dazai, ready to sail the both of them towards the exit on a smooth stream.

♡♡♡

---*ding*---

The elevator doors glide open with an elegant woosh that sounds like 'welcome home' to Chuuya's tired ears. "That's us," he says and motions for Dazai to step out first – not out of chivalry as much as principle. He doesn't turn his back on anyone.

The only acknowledgement he receives from Dazai is a glazed-over look so supple that silk could be spun from it. He sways from side to side but doesn't move. In many ways, he gives the impression of a marionette: pretty and pliable but not really present. It seems that the only way to get him to do anything is to pull his strings, so Chuuya decides that the fastest and easiest option is to carry Dazai the last bit of the way to their front door.

It's funny – well, not exactly funny, Chuuya is much too pissy to find *anything* amusing, but it's certainly interesting how challenging he suddenly finds the otherwise easy task of walking a straight line now that he has a slobbering, slurring, stupid friend sticking to his back with the punishing enthusiasm of a too-tight muzzle.

"Chuuuuuu-ya," Dazai whines, loud enough to alert every single neighbour in the entire building, "you're carrying me like a sack of potatoes. You should carry me princess-style."

When Chuuya reaches their door-mat, he drops Dazai off with little delicacy and puts on his business voice. "There. Stand on your own two bastard feet for just a second. Can't get my keys out of my pocket when you're cling-"

"S'okay, I'll help you." A laugh falls from Dazai's lips and right into Chuuya's ears, a tinkling caress of music.

And because Dazai is as utterly unscrupulous as he is, he doesn't even have the decency to leave a polite pause for processing – for his words to sink in enough for Chuuya to object. No, Chuuya doesn't get the chance to form a response before Dazai is in front of him, so close his delirious grin practically turns to pixels.

Then his hands are on Chuuya, travelling expanses of upper thighs to finally find their true north in Chuuya's pockets – one hand in each – fingers stretching and flexing, searching.

"Ah, there it is," Dazai retrieves the key; holds it up with a triumphant honour worthy of a trophy.

Meanwhile, Chuuya's mind short circuits...

And when the lag catches up to him, his upper thighs start tingling with afterimages of Dazai's handprints tattooed onto them through the fabric of his slacks.

He curls his entire fist around the key and wrests it out of Dazai's hold. "Thanks," he says, and if it oozes with sarcasm, he's not the least bit sorry – he's simply too confused about his feelings to sort them out enough to deliver a consistent tone.

It takes a while to get it right, but he gets the key into the keyhole on the fifth try (so much for being able to thread a needle on the first). He pushes onward into the genkan with strength he doesn't have, toes of his shoes with finesse he doesn't have, all the while holding on to Dazai with patience he really, truly, *em-fucking-phatically* doesn't have.

There's such shamelessness to the way Dazai carries himself (which is to say the way he fails to carry himself and all but collapses against the wall and crawls towards his bedroom).

And all Chuuya can do is watch with begrudging fondness and follow after Dazai as though dragged by an invisible leash.

Dazai throws himself into his bed. He twists his head, makes hooded eye contact from under the veil of his bangs and pats the spot next to him as though it's a throne reserved specifically for Chuuya. He even has the nerve to look all pleading and sweet.

"No," Chuuya shakes his head because he's not in a sugar-coating mood. "Why the fuck did you take the drug Dazai? What kind of insane fuckery goes through your genius mind to pull something like

that? Just-" he flails his hands about, not really knowing what else to do with himself, "*why?*"

"I live to disappoint."

"Don't give me that shit."

A beat passes, and then Dazai pouts. It looks like a grimace. "Let's not have serious discussions right now. I feel really good and relaxed. Come sit next to me?"

"Unbelievable." Chuuya turns around intending to walk out, slam the door behind him and let Dazai sleep it off in solitary confinement.

But a whisper quieter than the drop of a needle stops him. "I did it to make myself so vulnerable that you had to take care of me. I just wanted you to carry me home and fall asleep next to me while you let me play with your hair." He almost falls out of the bed as he grabs for Chuuya from across the room, reaching for something that's well out of his reach.

Watching the scene with an unholy mix of second-hand embarrassment, annoyance and a little bit of endearment, Chuuya makes a gesture of slapping Dazai's grabby phantom hands away. "You did this because I told you we needed to talk?"

Dazai nods sagely. "And look at me now." He points to himself, nearly whacking himself in the head. "Too woozy to carry a conversation… we should really stop talking." When Chuuya doesn't answer, he adds, "you should come here and let me test the springiness of your curls."

Some unknown force compels Chuuya to comply; cross the room in one step and plonk down next to Dazai, the bed creaking as miserably as his spirit as he sinks into the mattress. "You're a coward, you know? All this just to postpone a confrontation one day. Are you really that afraid of words?"

Another shaky exhale, and then Dazai ghosts cold fingers down Chuuya's arm, circles his wrist in an iron grip. His expression is a liminal space, barren. "Yes, terrified," he whispers, although he doesn't look it, eyes big and unseeing – nihilistically chill. It's an odd expression. So self-negating that it can only be genuine.

Dazai sighs, and it sounds as surrendering as a last breath. "Because I can guess the conclusion. You're going to tell me you're done with me. You are going to leave me."

“Wha-”

“So I made you stay with me-” Dazai holds Chuuya’s gaze the way he holds his own breath: like he’s willing to offer both his lungs in exchange for an extended moment, “-just one last night.”

The confession has Chuuya in a silk-glove chokehold. A quiet, whimpering eureka. That one thing that must never be said out loud.

Suddenly, all Dazai’s nonsense has a poetic resonance, and Chuuya can see his own dancing silhouette reflected in those doped, blown-out eyes; feel his intricate armour disintegrate on his body and leave him naked.

Oh, how he gets it.

“So that's the desperation.” Chuuya runs a hand through his hair, turning it to grease under his sweaty palms. His clammy fingertips slip, and he’s sure he’ll soon fall off the ledge he has been dangling from for eternities.

Hysterical laughter rumbles in his chest, cartwheeling around and leaving his insides tattered, heart migrating into his mouth. He wants to spit it right in Dazai’s face. It’s all very comical, but it’s not half as funny as it is painful.

And Dazai seems to think the same because his pretty face stitches into a grimace. “I’m manipulative,” he says darkly, as though he’s confessing a murder.

There’s something so self-absorbed about Dazai’s self-hatred. He acts like his intelligence is his only possession, and then he weaponises it – calls it manipulation – to justify giving up on himself.

“No,” Chuuya's tone leaves no room for argument. “You’re just unfathomably bad at translating your feelings into words, so instead, you act it all out.”

Dazai’s mouth drops into a perfect little ‘o’. “That’s what you think?” he asks, eyes watering as though he’s looking straight into a flashing camera.

“Yeah.” Chuuya tries to nod, but his neck is all stiff from the whiplash of too-many-emotions. Existing in Dazai’s orbit is a wild ride. “Your biggest problem is that you’re stupid – the stupidest smart person I’ve ever met.” Chuuya lets himself fall and is scooped up in an embrace

made of the tenderest velvet, cheek pressed against Dazai's chest. He stays there. Listens to the unsteady rhythm of the wild heart that beats directly into his eardrums.

There's something there. Something left unsaid. Chuuya can hear his own name tucked under Dazai's ribcage, unravelling with the rise and fall of his diaphragm.

It's not that Chuuya is feeling in a generous mood. It's just that he's using Dazai's chest as a headrest, and it would be more comfortable if Dazai's breathing would even out a bit. So Chuuya offers reassurance. "You drive me so fucking far with your shit, but I'll stick around as long as you'll have me, okay? I'm not going to leave. Ever."

"Then you're never getting rid of me," Dazai chimes from above and hugs Chuuya tighter. Because that's just what Dazai is like: sometimes he's razor-sharp, and Chuuya cuts himself trying to get closer, and sometimes he's a warm blanket – ruthless in his lies as well as in his honesty.

Chapter End Notes

Dazai can regulate his heartbeat in this au like he can in canon and when Chuuya rested his head on his chest, Dazai send him a little morse code message: I love you.

Also, I just think that:

Dazai □ Chuuya
Abandonment issues

Thank you so much for reading! I love kudos and comments

Chapter 6: Heart Shaped Timing

Chapter Summary

Dazai just wants Chuuya to be happy. Chuuya just wants Dazai.

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful people!

It has been 84 years, forever, and a day. I blame uni. (Very unfair that I have to study when I want to write gay romance fic). I hope you're all doing well and enjoying autumn 🍁💨💗 (or spring if you're in the southern hemisphere🍵🌸🐿).

I want to say thank you to all of you who read this far. I'm blown away by the positive response and feeling very emotional and like I could cry about it (happy tears). Here's a heart and a star for you, dear reader ❤☆

Content warnings for this chapter:
- Body image issues

Hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleep, ever the gentle lover and brutal leaver, throws Chuuya back into wakefulness with an ungentle hand. He falls through states of consciousness at terminal velocity and lands in Dazai's bed with bone-breaking impact.

Blink blink. The crust in his eyes tries to pull him back under with its heavy stickiness, and all Chuuya can do to fight back is stare into a ceiling that looks miles away as he uses the power of stubbornness to chase the brain fog away.

And his strong-willed insistence works the same way it always does, slowly but surely.

"Ughhhh." Chuuya pours a little pressure-cooked vitality into his limbs with a good stretch, starfishing himself across the entire bed.

And that's when he realises he's alone – the spot next to him is as cold as Dazai's missing presence is not.

In response to that observation, Chuuya's stomach twists like a thread jam on an industrial sewing machine. He can't decide if it's a sensation of relief, disappointment, or just his internal organs eating themselves in convulsions of hunger.

Truly a paradox. And he's willing to spend a good extra 10 minutes contemplating it, but then his train of thought gets derailed by a faint, unfamiliar melody, "du-du-du." The echoes of Dazai's sweet singing voice waft into the room, accompanied by the life-blood smell of coffee and caramelized sugar. It infiltrates Chuuya's ears and nose and – to be poetic about it (which Chuuya likes to be) – his very soul.

Is there anything more addictively beautiful than the combination of Dazai and the promise of caffeine?

Slowly, as to not upset the volatile balance of the morning too much, Chuuya rolls to his side, fingertips tracing the shape of Dazai's restless mind in his wrinkled pillow.

Then he notices it: a little purple note waiting for him on the nightstand.

Curiosity pulls his strings to pick it up, the paper rough under his fingertips, but gentle on his eyes. He rather likes purple. It reminds him of Dazai. Clever, capricious and ambiguously gendered.

So, encouraged and energised by a great colour-scheme, he loses himself in the note; ink that blurs into the familiar chaos of Dazai's questionable grammar:

Chuuya! My dearest darling sleeping beauty!

I hope you had a good night's sleep and feel super ready to face the day full of energy and good vibes (and plans to forgive your best friend for his minor mishaps?).

So anyway, I've been awake for a while now and spent the first bit of time watching you sleep, but then I thought, "is it creepy to watch your best friend in the world sleep?" and I decided that no, it isn't. Not really. But still... maybe you'd feel a little exposed if you woke up to me staring at you? Anyway, I decided to go make breakfast. So you can find me in the kitchen when you're ready to talk. It's going to be good. Real mature and honest. I promise.

Your Marshmallow <3

PS You snore.

PPS It's cute.

After a good five (or twenty or somewhere-in-that-range) re-reads, Chuuya puts the note down, back facing up. As out of sight as he tries to place it, though, It stays in his mind, the words circling round and round like incessant wheels.

He pats the sheets, hoping to find some strength lingering after a forgotten dream. He doesn't find anything.

With a somewhat sweaty palm, he scrubs his face. Dazai's conversation phobia is starting to feel awfully relatable.

Something about mornings makes Chuuya feel so disgustingly raw, and that's not a good way to have a grater-chat that could peel off the first few layers of skin.

So he decides that the best way to steel himself is to detour by the bathroom and pour the second-best kind of liquid courage – good old regular water – all over his body. Showering is a brilliant invention both because its ritualistic status categorises it as a justified type of procrastination and because it serves wonderful symbolic purposes; Chuuya likes to feel squeaky clean when discussing the dirty business of honesty.

Cold, cold, cold and brutal is what the floor is against his feet when he stumbles out of the bed. The early-morning misery of having to stand upright zaps all the way from his extremities and into his brain.

He seriously considers collapsing back into the soft mattress, but then, from the corner of his eyes, he notices Dazai's closet door creaking open as though it's winking at him.

Chuuya is about to get snarky with an inanimate object and tell it that the brutality of waking up isn't something to be taken lightly, but then, amongst the mighty mess that is Dazai's closet, something catches his attention. A purple shirt.

Well, that is a big bright glowing sign if Chuuya ever saw one.

Without a bated breath wasted on thinking it through, Chuuya sinks his fingers into the shirt and takes it with him.

♡♡♡

Scalding hot water drizzles down Chuuya's back, steams up the room, and leaves the glass door a blank canvas for him to sketch his shower thoughts on. Usually, he traces simple shapes into the mist. Flowers, clouds, stars. But when he's feeling particularly pathetic, he writes Dazai's name and draws a heart around it.

Just a sensitive artist who's in love with a masterpiece. A story as old as time.

But then, there are days like today where his fingers are too restless to bother with creative endeavours. Instead, he pours much-too-much shampoo on top of his head and digs his nails into his scalp.

"Wait… did I wash my hair already?" the ambience sings back at him, and Chuuya decides that it doesn't matter. His routine is already royally ruined, and it's only through loyalty to the system that he persists with conditioning and face scrub.

By the time Chuuya turns off the water, his skin itches from heat and over-enthusiastic get-the-frustrations-out exfoliation. It brings him a little comfort to look as rough as he feels.

It's just symmetrically satisfying when things are balanced. Inside like outside, and armour like silk; Dazai's shirt is soothing against the prickling anticipation, sliding over Chuuya's shoulders lighter than a cloud. It's a little big on him, but the oversized look is as everpink as a plentiful cherry blossom tree in spring, and as he sways from foot to foot in front of the mirror, the fabric billows around him with the acrobatic nimbleness of leaves dancing in wind. Timeless and intimate.

♡♡♡

Dressed to impress, Chuuya steps into the kitchen. Fingers tap-tap-tapping against the side of his leg with more jittery restlessness than he cares to acknowledge, nails drilling into the seam of his trousers. Maybe he's not as skilled at hiding his nervousness as he is at cursing its existence... not very casually chic of him. Which is something worth having a crisis about.

But luckily, Dazai is there to do what he does best – he saves Chuuya from wandering off into the familiar territory known as 'lost in

thought, never to return'. Because Dazai exists as brightly and devastatingly as a lighthouse that sinks more ships than it saves, and it's impossible not to latch on to him.

He stands there with his back to Chuuya: long, lanky body bent over the counter, fuzzy morning light wrapping around him like a glowing gown, draping beautifully over the curve of his spine. He appears to be observing the coffee machine work its magic with great intent, and if he's aware of Chuuya's lurking presence behind him, he doesn't give any indication of it.

Steam puffs. Black liquid pours. The coffee machine beeps proudly.

Dazai picks up the little cup of espresso from the tray and answers with a melodic "beep, beep" of his own.

It's communication at its finest, and Chuuya feels left out and helpless in the face of Dazai's utterly unfair charm. He has to bite down hard on his lip to not let out a laugh, or whimper, or scream, or *something* very primal and achy.

But for all he manages to hold his tongue, the floorboards deceive him, screech under his weight and give away his hiding-in-the-open spot. He covers it up with a one-note, "uh-hi."

In the winds of that awkwardness, Dazai whirls around. His eyes glide over Chuuya's shoulders and chest in a rough palette-knife-ish sweep that leaves Chuuya feeling all blurred out and dizzy.

"Nice shirt," Dazai says, mouth tilting into a grin that is both small and endlessly comforting. Before Chuuya can come up with an excuse for his clothes-stealing shenanigans, Dazai brushes it off with a wink and moves the plot along. "Sit," he says – no, commands – and pulls out a chair for Chuuya.

Getting told what to do is something Chuuya dislikes on principle, but the treacherous flicker in his chest is undeniable, and well, maybe if Chuuya is being honest with himself (and he does aim for a no-bullshit approach to the truth), he might find just the tiniest bit of comfort in it the effortless go-along-with-the-stream pliancy of following orders without questions. And Dazai makes it so easy; his tone doesn't leave any wiggle room for second guesses, panic or misrepresentations.

In one swift pirouetting motion, Dazai rounds the table and pulls out a chair for himself. He sinks into his seat, steeples his fingers to rest his

chin on top, observes Chuuya with an x-ray-intensity that pierces right through bone, marrow and defences.

It’s enough to make even a self-identified creature of confidence like Chuuya squirm. “So...” he trails off, distraction getting the better of his attention span and drawing his gaze to the breakfast plate in front of him. It’s simple in the way Dazai’s food adventures tend to be – just a piece of toast – but it's topped with jam in the shape of a wonky heart. An anti-feast delivered so sincerely that Chuuya is willing to overlook the lack of substance.

“This is for you.” Dazai slides the cup across the table in a fast motion that comes across a little more demanding than a peace-offering ought to, coffee sloshing, threatening to spill.

“Thanks.” Chuuya accepts the incoming drink with the gratitude a good diversion deserves, content to let time stretch a thin as he busies himself blowing ripples on the surface of his coffee and tries to think of a good conversation starter.

In the end, though, Dazai is the one to kick it all off.

“I’d like to explain myself,” he says, sounding deceptively calm about it. It’s only because Chuuya knows his best friend so well that he’s able to hear the scripted nature of those words, an off-beat-ness that matches the brittle beauty of falling leaves or something equally delicate and in-the-process-of disintegration. But it's hard to tell. Even Chuuya, with all his eye for detail and fine motor skills, can't pinpoint Dazai's feelings with precision – it's as futile as trying to predict the weather or next season's fashion trends.

Chuuya has to take a shot of caffeine on that, but as soon as it’s in his mouth, he regrets it with the violent force of a backfiring projectile splutter that he ends up swallowing. “Ew. It tastes like bitter syrup.”

"Oh. Uh." Dazai blinks rapidly as though having a difficult time processing the information. Data received but not rendered. "...But bitter syrup is better than bitter coffee, right?"

"No." Chuuya sets the cup down as far away from himself as his arm will stretch. He needs to keep his fidgeting hands occupied, though, so he picks up his toast (which he doesn't trust much on account of it being prepared by Dazai), breaks off a taste-testing piece and shoves it into his mouth.

It’s dry but not inedible, so Chuuya swallows with a smile and that

infinite patience he reserves for Dazai and Dazai only. "You know, for someone who claims to know me so well, it's strange how you don't know how I like my coffee."

"I do! Of course. I was just-" Dazai flails his hands about as though trying to convey a tremendous gravity of purpose in motion pictures, "- y'know, just trying to sweeten you a bit."

"Hah?"

"I mean – no. Not like that," Dazai rushes to say, nearly stumbling over his own stunts, "Chuuya is sweet enough as he is, of course. Was just trying to sweeten the mood." He flutters his lashes, and it's an unfairly disarming act, every bit as overly saccharine as his culinary concoctions.

"How did it end up so sweet anyway?" Chuuya says because he feels the overwhelming need to say something. "I didn't see you adding sugar."

"Oh no no, I put the sugar directly into the coffeemaker along with the coffee beans so they could mix in the grinder and mingle their aromas," Dazai beams, sounding unreasonably proud of his deranged experiment. "I've been doing test-runs all morning to get the sugar-to-coffee proportions just right. Clever right?"

No. Chuuya is appalled. But all he can do is groan, utterly defenceless against such… such blatant *Dazainess*. "Whatever. Go on. Explain yourself."

"Okay, so." Dazai pauses, his lips trembling with everything unspoken. "I know there's something you want to ask me."

Yes, there is. A lot of things, actually. But the one that has been scraping against the walls of Chuuya's skull the most incessantly isn't a question as much as an off-the-rack conclusion he needs a little help putting into perspective: "My boss… is your uncle?"

A long unblinking staring contest ensues, and Chuuya seizes the pause to get a little more food in him, so without breaking eye contact, he takes a bite of his toast.

And that's when Dazai demonstrates his masterful timing and gives a single nod.

Suddenly Chuuya's appetite is all but gone. He stops mid-chew;

swallows the unsavoury implications of the truth with a gulp. It tastes exactly the way he expected, which is to say it tastes like he needs to clear his throat and spit out all his feelings in the form of a gruff, "say it." He is tempted to tug on a 'you coward', but he doesn't because he's nice.

“Yes, Mori is my uncle.” It’s an admission kept in silence so long that its unveiling should have the whole earth resounding in Dazai’s chest, but he says it in a casual tone that passes it off as little more than common knowledge.

How unexpected. Chuuya’s surprise scrambles into a startled croak. “You’re not denying it then? Not even a little bit?”

“How would I confirm or deny a very categorical yes or no question ‘a little bit’?”

“Well, I don’t know, but I'm sure *you* could find a way of doing it,” Chuuya objects. He realises how ungrateful a response it is to Dazai's attempt at sincerity, and he blames the shock of being served a hearty dish of honesty when he's so used to being spoon-fed sugary omissions of truth.

“I’m not stupid, and I know you aren't either, so I won’t insult your intelligence by trying to wiggle out of it. It’s too late for that." Dazai holds Chuuya's gaze in a tight twist. "Yesterday, when you started talking about honesty, it wasn't hard to put two and two together to figure out Mori had gone and told you my dirty little secret.”

Dazai’s words land like rusty scissors cutting through tulle, tearing everything apart into tattered but glittery debris. He blinks, lashes sweeping over dewy eyes with that pleading, kicked puppy quality to them. But although he’s a master of disguise, his facial performance of innocence does little to distract from his talent for ruining things.

It could be a perfect tragedy, but Chuuya decides to lean into his idealistic tendencies; to reserve judgement and approach the catastrophe with tender curiosity and reckless disregard for landmines. In fact, he’s going to start by stepping right in Dazai’s carefully kept flower bed of lies and see if it blows up in both their faces. “I can’t believe you’d keep something like that from me,” he says.

No explosion. Only the silent crack as Dazai’s smile wobbles – just for a second – before he collects himself again. He lifts a finger and gently pushes his glasses up his nose the way he does when he’s preparing to

say something that has an equal chance of being profound or half-baked bullshit. “Does it help my case that I had the best of intentions?” he asks, tilting his head to the side, and then, after resting there ever so restlessly, back to the other side.

Perhaps he’s trying to impersonate a pendulum.

Perhaps his plan is to hypnotise Chuuya.

Perhaps it’s working. Just a little.

“I’m sure you did,” Chuuya says because he *is*. For all Dazai knows how to fuck things up, he doesn't know how to be cruel. Cruelness, however, doesn’t require knowledge – it just requires the carelessness to act on good motives with horrible consequences. “But even if you only ever wanted the best for me, that doesn't change the fact that my career is a lie, and-”

“It’s not,” Dazai grunts. He sounds more personally offended than he has the right to, given how wholly and utterly this disaster is his fault.

“You told Mori to accept my intern application, and then, then, *then*-” Chuuya sputters, incoherent against the swell of emotions, “-then you went and told him to offer me a job.”

“It’s not like that,” Dazai keeps eye contact but fiddles with his sleeves as though he’s looking for answers or magic tricks.

“Yes, it is, and I’m stupid for not realising sooner. I knew it was too good to be true all along, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. *No one* lands an internship with Mori Designs – that just doesn't happen. They don’t even take interns!” Chuuya realises he’s leaning into a pitch that could permanently damage his vocal cords. His tendency to lose his shit at maximum volume isn’t his favourite thing about himself, but that doesn't stop him from doing it. “Of course, there had to be a logical explanation. I was delusional for thinking I was hired for my talent.”

"But you were," Dazai insists, erring the conversation away from the brink of distress. "Mori was the one making the decision to offer you an internship and then a permanent position. I never asked him for any favours, and you know why?"

"Why?" Chuuya shoots right back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Because I knew I didn't have to. Your talent speaks loud and clear for itself, so all *I* had to do was direct Mori's attention to it. I walked into his office and dropped your portfolio on his desk, and then I left without a word. That's all I did. I promise."

“Okay...” Chuuya un-crosses his arms. He can’t decide if he’s doing it because he's worried about getting stuck in a defensive position or if he’s trying to buy time to figure out how to feel. “But why didn’t you just tell me about your familial connection to Mori? Why go behind my back like that?”

A sigh that sounds like it’s wrenched from the very depths of his dishonest soul falls from Dazai’s mouth. “Because of your self-made hero thing."

"My what?" Chuuya squeaks. He's too shaken by the eerie self-displacement of having his insecurities recounted to him to admit that he knows exactly what Dazai is talking about.

"Your pride, Chuuya.” Dazai says with a matter-of-fact-ness that’s downright ruthless. “It’s all tangled up with your professional identity. Your work is a huge part of who you are, and that’s cool, but you can’t just accept how insanely good you are at what you do. You need proof, and you will only accept the evidence you carve with your own two hands.”

The impulse to protest itches, but Chuuya knows that scratching it will just make everything worse. Trying to tear into an obvious truth is a fool's errand. No, if the hat fits, it fits – and if it fits, Chuuya will wear it like a crown. So he nods his agreement. “Go on,” he says as regally as he can.

“I knew you wouldn’t be super keen on the idea of me pulling on my contacts to get the right people to look at your application, so I figured – better to ask for forgiveness than permission, right? But then I... I just never got around to asking for forgiveness because that would require telling you what I’d done, and I couldn't find the right words to explain it.”

Chuuya chews on that and decides it tastes even sadder than a lost appetite. “Couldn’t find the words? You should have looked harder, then.”

Despite the twinkle bells of sunshine that fall in misty cascades over Dazai’s face, he looks like a shadow. “I was going to. I was just waiting for the right time to tell you.” He looks past Chuuya and into

something as far away as a recent past that can't be changed, unmade memories withering in his coolness when he says, "but then it never came."

"Dazai." Chuuya groans, slain on memory lane and raw with exasperation. "The right moment has passed you by a hundred times. You've had ample opportunity to say something. Just about every day since I got the internship position would have been a good time."

"I'm sorry, I–" Dazai breaks off into a brooding sigh with no closure, letting his point run away from him.

"You what?" Chuuya presses. His brain is out swimming, and maybe that's why he feels hopeful enough to reach across the table and lay his hand on top of Dazai's. They're trembling at the same frequency, but after a flash of sharing the same wavelength, they seem to phase-cancel each other out into a long calm silence.

"I wanted you to be happy," Dazai whispers, making it sound so simple. He holds Chuuya's gaze as he adjusts his glasses with his free hand and leans forward in his seat. "I grew up in the pocket of the most famous designer in all of Japan, *the* Mori Ougai. I was raised in the fashion industry, spent my days surrounded by designers, models, shiny fabrics, and incessant gossip. I've seen things. I've heard things. I know things – like how hard it is to get a foot in. I didn't want you to have to work unpaid work placements for the first five years of your career when you're so talented. You deserve to shine."

The knot in Chuuya's stomach unties and retwists itself around his heart like a ribbon bow. "You just wanted me to be happy?" he repeats, to hear the words resonate in his own voice. They sound true.

Dazai nods so vigorously his glasses nearly fall off.

"And you *swear* you didn't blackmail Mori into signing me on, right?"

"Yep." Dazai agrees, and he sounds so solemnly sincere that it comes across as a parody. It's reassuring in its own roundabout way because if there's anything stable about Dazai, it's his dramatics.

"Okay," Chuuya squeezes Dazai's hand. He hopes it communicates all the fragmented, scrap-fabric thoughts in his head – thoughts he aches to patch together. There's just one lingering concern he has to dispel before he can begin to cut out the pattern pieces: "But don't you think it's possible Mori only hired me because he wanted to

make *you* happy?"

"Oh no, don't worry. Mori doesn't operate like that," Dazai says on a laugh so acidic it must scorch his tongue. "He only makes decisions that work out in his own self-interest. I can guarantee you that he wouldn't have offered you a job if he didn't think you were the best person for it."

It's exactly the reassurance Chuuya needs, but the poorly veiled animosity in Dazai's tone puts an edge to it, making Chuuya wonder out loud, "why do I get the feeling you don't like Mori very much?"

"Because I don't." Dazai shrugs, half-shouldered, careless and giving the distinct impression that it's no big deal. And maybe it isn't. But the sudden sullen energy he radiates suggests there's more to the story – that he's hiding a petticoat of unspoken layering.

A suspicion that's confirmed when Dazai elaborates, "Mori is a brilliant designer and businessman, but he's not very good at people." He says it with distant dispassionateness the way he might read out loud from a book that doesn't interest him much, recounting a story that isn't his. Except it is.

"So-"

"It wasn't that bad. It was fine. It *is* fine."

"Hey, it's okay." Chuuya slips into compassion-mode, as easily as he does combat boots, "I never asked you about your mysterious millionaire uncle before because I figured it was a sensitive topic, and you'd tell me when you were ready. That's still my position; it's okay if you don't want to talk about it."

It's cute, the way Dazai sways back and forth like he's seat-sick from sitting still for too long. "I don't mind talking about it. It's just not that exciting. My past isn't pretty enough for a designer like you."

If it's a joke, it's a weak one, and if it's an attempt at actual sense-making, it fails spectacularly, which Chuuya points out in that know-it-all voice he can't help but slide into when his words dig into the fashion archives. "The corset doesn't exactly have the most charming history either – what with the steel boning and tight lacing and toxic beauty standards – but I like to think that we can learn from the past and change for the better. I want to design corsets that are comfortable, not constrictive."

“Well, in that case,” Dazai lifts a finger, taps it against his lips. Then he blurts out, “I was a weird kid."

"I believe you." Chuuya nods and punctuates it with a meaningful gaze.

"I didn’t have any friends and it was impossible to find a babysitter for me because I would scare them all away, so I spent most of my time alone. But sometimes, Mori would bring me with him to work, and when he did, it was magical – it turned my lonely little existence into a catwalk. I moved from design studio to showroom to photoshoot, and everywhere I went, the fancy fashion people would lavish attention on me. They'd dress me up and make me pose for the camera. I was desperate for affection, so when they told me I was a born model, I took that wisp of validation and turned it into a roaring obsession."

"That sounds like something you would do." It's a comment Chuuya can't hold back any more than the fondness that seeps into his smile as he says it.

"Right?" Dazai laughs in the ragged rhythm of a door being ripped off its hinges. "Anyway, Mori encouraged my model-fixation. He told me that I could be the face of his company one day, and that gave my under-stimulated brain something to work towards. So I held on tight to this newfound purpose of becoming beautiful." He wrinkles his nose the way he does when he’s sniffing out deep insights. There’s a tragic profundity to it when he says, "but, beauty is a tough career path.”

While Chuuya tries to think of a non-corny way of saying 'I think you're perfect just the way you are', Dazai continues his story: “Mori started micromanaging every aspect of my life from when I could sleep, to what I could eat, to the moisturizer I used, all because I wasn’t pretty enough as I was. I enjoyed the attention, but not the lack of control over my body and life. So, in an epic move of self-serving rationalisation, I decided that it didn't matter anyway – that I didn't even want to be a model. My late teenage rebellion consisted of eating a chocolate bar and filing an application for a degree in neuroscience,” he frames his head with his hands and smiles a hollow smile that’s probably meant for a non-present camera more than for Chuuya. “And here we are.”

“But,” Chuuya struggles to find words, brain spinning fast enough to pulverize all the half-formed questions in his head, “that doesn’t make sense.”

“Welcome to my life, Chuuya,” Dazai tweeters, casually contrived in the way only careworn vulnerability can bring about.

“If you have a complex around modelling – if you explicitly decided you didn’t want to do it – then why the *fuck* were you so adamant on modelling my lingerie collection?”

“I already told you. It's important to you, and you’re important to me.” Dazai twirls a stray lock of hair around a finger, delicate and distracted, “but I also saw it as an opportunity to re-experience modelling as more than a pressure to look a certain way.”

That makes sense, Chuuya supposes. It’s just like Dazai to stumble into his own open wounds in the name of healing, all heels and no laces, with little to hold him in place but a death-or-glory attitude towards falling. It’s reckless, but it’s also brave, and Chuuya respects that. “Is it working?” he has to ask.

“Yeah,” Dazai nods, coy as a secret. “With you, it feels like an art form. Working with you is very inspiring.”

Warmth pinches Chuuya’s cheeks. It’s a blush like a fever. “I’m flattered,” he says under his breath, “and I’m so sorry your uncle decided to show you one of the ugliest parts of the industry.”

“Mori isn't all bad. He just likes harping on my shortcomings. Plenty of people grow up with more unsavoury parental figures. I actually think he loves me in his own twisted way, and sometimes I feel guilty that I can't return it. It’s weird. He messed me up much more than he intended to, when really, his worst crime was that he thought the best way of helping me cope with my-” Dazai makes exaggerated air quotes, “*overly sensitive nature,* as he called it, was to tell me what to do instead of letting me decide for myself.” Dazai’s voice has taken on a squeaky quality, pitch trying to outrun a conversation that's slipping out of control. “Anyway, you know my philosophy – I like to forgive my enemies – so I’ve made peace with the past. It’s all good now.”

There’s something so broken about Dazai’s attempt to spread his story into threadbare triviality, making the burden of a lonely childhood sound easy. But there’s nothing easy about internalizing the concept that the body’s cravings will end in loss. It’s a heavy concept to carry around, and it’s a red thread that connects to the present. Because it’s suddenly very clear where Dazai got his approach to honesty from. “You didn’t really feel like you were heard or allowed to express your feelings, did you?” Chuuya asks.

“You know how it is. No point in communicating when there is no one to respond at the other end.” Dazai half-answers and brushes it off with a shrug. “But I really don’t want to make this about me when this mess,” he spins his hand around like a planet in orbit of which he’s the reluctant barycenter, “is supposed to be me apologising to you.”

“You already did.”

“I should do it some more. I fuzzed up spectacularly.”

“You did.” A smile tugs at Chuuya’s lips, and he doesn't care to hold back. Dazai’s self-awareness usually comes in the form of denial, so holding his hand as he faces his mistakes feels very special. Special enough to reward. So Chuuya leans a little closer and admits, “But I accept your apology. You don’t have to keep telling me how sorry you are.”

There’s a blissful split-second where Chuuya gets lost just staring into bottomless eyes, but then Dazai propels himself out of their shared daze with a jerk. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah,” Chuuya cards a hand through his still-damp hair, tangling it all up and wincing at the pain. ”I think what you did was messed up, and it wasn’t right, but,,” he finally lets out a breath that his lungs have been holding on to for too long. “I forgive you.”

“Thank you." Dazai’s voice is a thin, open-weave veil that barely covers his words. “I’m not sure I deserve it, but I’m selfish, so I'll take it.”

Feelings hang in the air, thick enough to use as inner lining for a winter jacket. Chuuya wants to wrap himself in it. “You do deserve it. I don't want you to feel bad. I just want you to communicate honestly with me.”

Of course, Dazai has to go and add a layer of theatricality to cope; he lifts a hand, clenches his heart and chirps, “got it. The skeleton’s are out in the open. The only thing I’m hiding in my closet is heaps of rags and rubbish and school books I shoved in there and closed the door. You know how it is. Tidying is so tedious.”

Chuuya snorts. “I’m serious, though. No more secrets. No more lies.”

The smile on Dazai’s face stays in place, static and strained. “I mean... a girl is allowed some secrets, right? A few white lies here and there, a-”

“Cut it out,” Chuuya interrupts, withdrawing his hand from where it’s resting on top of Dazai’s to slap it onto the table.

“Surely I don't have to tell you *everything*? You were the one who said that I don't have to disclose my sensitive childhood stuff if I don't want to.”

Well, that's fair. It's not like Chuuya is a completely open book either, and hypocrisy isn't a good look. So he reels in his request, modifies it a bit, and throws it back out, “If it affects me, I deserve to know.”

Before Dazai can wipe the panic off his face and replace it with his usual personal brand of inscrutability, Chuuya catches it by the tail and yanks with all he has. “So it does have something to do with me. What is it? Out with it.”

Dazai tenses into a bristled, eye-darting impersonation of a cornered cat searching for an escape route. “I want to tell you, but,” he bites his lip – bites off his words as he scoots back his chair. “Listen. You may have forgiven me, but I’m sure I'm not exactly on your hit list right now, so it feels like a bad time to bring up something so delicate. Please just trust me when I say you don’t want to know.”

“But I do want to know.”

“I’ll tell you-” Dazai lets a long pitiful pause pass, “-someday.”

“Na-ah. We just talked about your sense of never-arriving timing. Life is just a haze of chances flashing by, one after the other, and they're never as perfect as we want them to be, but at some point, you have to grab one, and I’m telling you that this is your shot.” Chuuya takes a second to marinate in his motivational wisdom, but in the time it takes him to flutter his lashes into two slow blinks, Dazai, the little bastard of a traitor of a deserter, is already out of his chair and halfway across the room, scrambling and clawing at empty space and air molecules to propel himself forward.

But Chuuya has reflexes of steel, and although his legs aren’t as endless as Dazai’s, they have never failed to carry him to the finish line at winning speed.

Dazai grabs onto the door frame, swings himself around it in a pole-dancing move, runs into the living room, and jumps over the couch in a vast leap. It's a blur of sprawling limbs, a whirlwind of motion, and from the epicentre of it, he reaches out to grab Chuuya’s sketchbook from the console. Ripping out a piece of paper, he curls it into a ball

and throws it (with more force than his noodle-arms ought to possess), aiming straight for Chuuya's vitals.

The paper-bullet hits Chuuya in the stomach; falls to the floor with an undignified plop. It's honestly so pathetic Chuuya can't even find it in him to be mad. "Dazai, you're being childish." He slithers forward, confident and calm in a way he can only afford because his target is trapped.

The back of Dazai's legs hit the couch, hindering his escape. "I'm not. I'm the one being reasonable here. I'm telling you that this is a dangerous topic, and-"

"I'm not afraid of a little danger." Chuuya stops when they're toe-to-toe (he has to dip his head back to ensure they're also eye-to-eye, but that's neither here nor there). He's just about to poke a finger right in Dazai's chest and demand an answer, but then the world turns on its head. It spins, and whirls, and twirls into a carousel of colours. The only thing anchoring him is the unmistakable glow of Dazai's nearness. The smell of ink, and lavender, and the very personification of exquisite intricacy.

"Ugh," Chuuya lets out a little gasp when his eternal fall finds its soft landing. His back sinks into soft sofa cushions, which is nice, sure, but it has nothing on the weight that blankets him from above, Dazai. It's a fit so perfect that, in a moment of weakness, Chuuya has the thought that his body is made to mold to Dazai's.

Chuuya's little heart sighs romantically, gleaming internally at the idea of two very different materials coming together, complementing one another to create a unified design that's so much greater than the sum of its parts. It reminds Chuuya of how much he loves his profession. Which is a lot.

Still, it's not even half as much as he loves the disaster who's observing him from above with a tilted head, glasses sliding down his nose, and hair sticking out every which way. Dazai looks the part of a mad scientist, and maybe that's exactly what he is – surely, it has to be insanity that compels him to lean forward and wrap his thin, delicate, poison-ivy-like fingers around Chuuya's wrists to guide them over his head.

How many times has Chuuya dreamed about being in this exact position only to wake up alone in his bed with sticky sheets and stickier shame? "Uh?" he says intelligently, blinking at Dazai,

wondering if his vision will snap out of what he can only believe to be a hallucination if he bats his lashes fast enough.

“Listen, Chuuya,” Dazai grazes a thumb over Chuuya’s pulse point, a torn gesture that can't seem to decide if it's there to comfort or threaten. “I’m sorry. I get that I’m giving you massive trust issues here, and as I said, I *want* to tell you – almost did a hundred times already, because it thought you-” Dazai cuts himself off, nails digging into Chuuya’s skin in the shape of crescent moons and repressed frustration. “But I can’t right now. Not when you’re still mad at me.”

“But I’m not, you obtuse idiot.” Chuuya wiggles with no real motivation to escape. “What part of I forgive you don’t you understand? Just tell me!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Dazai snaps in the voice of a wounded animal, clearly pained by the idea of having to spell it out.

And Chuuya can’t for the life of him understand why, so he shakes his head as violently as his thoughts race. “No. Nothing about the way you act is ever obvious.”

As if on command, Dazai sinks into his unreadable countenance, eyes blanking into vacant screens.

He blinks a couple of times, long lashes like black clouds. When he resurfaces, it's with a smile on his face that seems positively cruel. “Fine,” he says, sounding the very opposite of fine. And then he says something totally unexpected. “I love you.”

A freezing sensation crawls up on Chuuya, claws digging into his back, making the hair at the back of his nape stand. It’s the flavour of dangling over a precipice, and it’s the age-old question turning over in his head. Is this the time to go in for a fist bump? One of those platonic ‘I love you too, man’ moments? Or is this-

“I love you,” Dazai repeats, clears his throat of hoarseness that sounds symptomatic of an infectious emotion, and adds, “so much that it makes me sick.” His brows knit into something approaching a scowl. It’s a look that reeks of accusation – like all of this is somehow Chuuya’s fault. And then he spits out in the tone of an insult, “I’m *in* love with you.”

Reality bends around those words as gracefully as a custom-made glove, insulating Chuuya in stunned silence. He can feel his heart hammering against his ribcage, begging to be let out. He wants to

pour a confession of his own directly into Dazai's mouth, but he's pinned in place and can't move, so if he wants it, he'll have to ask for it. And words are hard.

Words are hard, which Dazai knows, so of course, he has to go and demand the most: "Say something."

At this point Chuuya's is left with nothing but his instincts' solutions, so he tilts his chin and croaks, "Kiss me?"

"What?"

"Please."

Time stops, and when it starts again, Dazai's lips caress Chuuya's – cold, quivering, and everything Chuuya has ever dreamed about. So he fades into it in the shape of a smile.

It's a weightless kiss that Chuuya accepts with a simplicity of heart that vibrates through his chest as a content hum. It's an invitation, which Dazai takes and breaks into equal parts quivering breaths and desperation, nipping at the side of Chuuya's lower lip, suckling on it with a dreamy sigh.

It's a sound as exquisite as red wine, and Chuuya wants to lick it into his mouth and wrap it around his tongue. So he tries to surge up to do just that, but that's when Dazai lets go; of Chuuya's mouth and wrists.

"Was that what all you wanted from me?" Dazai asks, a tight-rope of a question. He juts his chin and presses a hand to Chuuya's collarbone with a force that says he's willing to break bones.

As if Chuuya could ever refuse to carry Dazai's weight.

Words are still hard, but Chuuya has never let hardships get in his way, so he reaches out, fingers brushing Dazai's cheek. "All I want is you."

Chapter End Notes

> I have this HC that Dazai is the most awkward of romantics. He can't say "I love you", at least not in the way he wants to. Like he's so used to picking his words carefully that saying something so real feels weird and performative. I don't know if that makes sense? Anyway, I was like, "if I'm going to make him say it, I'm going to make him hate it." I love Dazai. I also love hurting him

😈💗

Also, been thinking a lot about this quote from Jane Austen's Emma: If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more.

Thank you so much for reading! I love kudos and comments. I collect them and treasure them like a dragon on a mountain of gold.

Chapter 7: Marshmallow

Chapter Summary

In which Chuuya and Dazai are utterly obsessed with each other.

Chapter Notes

Hello beautiful butterflies. I hope you're well <3
This chapter took me forever to finish because exams happened (and then just kept happening all throughout December and January). But I'm finally ready to post the LAST CHAPTER. It was a lot of fun to write and I hope I got the tone right and it makes you smile.
Thank you so much for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Dazai is surprised to have his militant love confession returned, it doesn't show. He doesn't look much of anything – the armour of practised pretence scrubbed off his face, leaving him as expressionless and exposed as a headless department-store mannequin. Unsettling. Beautiful.

"Uh," Chuuya offers, insightfully. His voice sounds foreign to his own ears, and it makes him want to stroke a thumb over Dazai's cheek, just to confirm that neither of them is made of plastic.

Of course, Dazai leans into it only to recoil. He tilts his head into an analytical angle, looking down at Chuuya with the cold computational officiousness of a calculator, equations flashing across his retinas.

It's a serious sort of scrutiny – a strife with chaos crossed by the blaze of unimaginable combustion, and Chuuya is left on the outside with only the exhaust fumes.

Well, If Dazai intends to turn into a dead-end smokescreen every time Chuuya tries to reach out, they'll never get anywhere. "Say something?" Chuuya challenges, entrapping Dazai with his own words.

Stalemate silence follows. Then suddenly, Dazai's mouth curls into a smile, sharper than a capitulation and softer than a provocation. He laughs, amused and melodious – like the conversation is dancing along to his favourite song. Maybe it is.

“You could have told me a long time ago,” he says, conversational and breezy in much the same way his body language is not (what with his metal-bar-thighs bracketing Chuuya's hips and keeping him in place).

He exhales another whistling laugh, a warm breeze. Interrogation-smug, he asks in the most ingratiating voice, “you like me?” It's a question in the style of a joke, not half as romantic as it's embarrassing – Dazai's brand of communication difficulties perpetually manifesting as tragic comedy.

And Chuuya considers saying no for the sake of teaching Dazai a lesson; considers it for a whole second. But this isn’t about making a point or winning an argument. It’s about the tinkle on his lips, the taste of absence on his tongue. So he can’t stop the truth from exploding in his mouth: “I like you too much. I think about you all the time.”

“Oh. And why would you keep that from me, hmm?”

“For the same reason you kept it from me, I assume,” Chuuya bites back, except there’s more buzz than bite to it.

“I’m not sure that’s a good enough explanation,” Dazai says, but at least he has the grace to sound fake-haughty about it. So confusing and so close. Close enough to bend out of shape, hot under Chuuya’s collar and under his skin.

“What do you want me to say?” Chuuya asks, opting for flagrant forthrightness because the only surefire way to win Dazai’s rigged games is to get the cheat codes.

Dazai rewards the manoeuvre with a wicked smile. “Tell me how badly you want me again."

Honestly, Dazai isn’t in a position to make demands, but Chuuya isn't in a position to point that out, so that makes them a matched mismatch at best and a fucking mess at worst.

And it takes a great deal of courage to love complexity, but Chuuya does – so much that it leaks out of him. “You're all I want. All my thoughts keep circling back to you, and it's driving me out of my mind."

“That sounds positively horrific,” Dazai says with mirth verging on sadism. He dips forward in a no-safety-net freefall, hair tickling Chuuya’s cheeks on the way down.

The world turns into a blur of shared breaths and nearness. Dazai must deem the intimate atmosphere worthy of personal disclosure because he admits in a whisper: “I suspected that much.”

“Hah?”

Dazai laughs again – one of those stupid jingle-like laughs, stirred by his ruthless routine of feigned nonchalance. It’s a woeful waste of acting talent, but in terms of being annoying on purpose, he’s certainly keeping up his good stats. Chuuya watches the clownery unfold with a surreal sense of recognition.

A funhouse mirror and a cracked surface drama of reality. Absurdity speaks to Chuuya's artistic sensibilities, though, so he lets Dazai get away with the simplified smooth-talk without interjecting – just raises an eyebrow.

“You’re not hard to read,” Dazai muses, or accuses, or something, “you keep looking at me like you want to look away, and that’s not the way you’re supposed to look at a friend – that’s how you look at something-” he puts up a hand to cup his mouth, lowers his voice to a theatrical hiss, “*-forbidden*."

There’s a climactic air about that phrasing, and Chuuya likes it.

"When we talk, I can hear unspoken thoughts in your awkward silences,” Dazai murmurs, cold lips grazing Chuuya’s forehead, "and you get so flustered whenever I touch you."

As if on command, Chuuya can feel his face heat up – suggestible to Dazai’s every demand. It feels liberating to let it happen without suppressing it, allowing the blush to spread down his neck, all concerns replaced by the singular hope that it colours him kissable. Maybe he’s even shameless enough to part his mouth a little and flutter his lashes in an attempt to make wishes come true.

What he gets for his efforts is a finger pressing against his lips, severe as a threaded needle threatening to stitch his mouth shut.

“Wanna know why I didn’t confess my feelings for you sooner?” Dazai asks, but it's not a question. It's a rolling ball from the hillside of unfair excuses. “As you put it so succinctly, I'm afraid of words.”

There's nothing for Chuuya to do but blink his eyes, perpetually blinded by Dazai-ness.

“I know, it’s tragic,” Dazai sighs, his histrionic delivery an ever-wonderful distributor of wit and his timing ever-brutal. “Funny how you appear to suffer from the same affliction,” he offers a judging jab as insight, then continues dressing up his own case, “at least I tried to make up for it by *showing* you how I feel.” A pause follows – a little opening and a lot of dramatic effect.

Where a clever response should be, Chuuya has the impulse to stick his tongue out and lick Dazai’s finger. He's pretty sure he’ll cut himself on it and end up with the taste of blood in his mouth if he does, though, so he holds back, tips his head in wordless encouragement.

And Dazai easily picks up the thread. “I was so sure you liked me back, but the harder I tried to flirt, the more mixed signals I received. I was so confused, and that’s a very unfamiliar feeling for me.”

Being hamstrung by confusion is something Chuuya can relate to, but he doesn't have the privilege of calling it an unfamiliar feeling. He wants to scream in embittered commiseration, *'now you know how I feel'*, but then Dazai pouts, and words turn into unhinged laughter.

“If you like me, why did you try to push me away?” Dazai asks, jutting his chin. “That thing with Yosano really hurt, you know? I put myself out there only to get rejected in the most humiliating way.” He sits back, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I didn’t mean to. I couldn't make sense of how you were acting. I didn’t know you had anything other than friendly feelings for me,” Chuuya explains. It's a humbling sort of epiphany to see his lovelorn longing for the two-way street it is – to realise he has walked it bloody in Yosano's nine-inch heels. Ouch. “I didn’t want to work with you because I’m so disgustingly attracted to you, and I was afraid I'd have… uh, *unprofessional thoughts* about the way you look in lingerie.”

When Dazai’s glasses slide down his nose, he doesn’t bother lifting a finger to push them back in place. He simply shoots an unimpressed look over the rims. “It should have been clear that I wanted you to have unprofessional thoughts about me.”

“It wasn’t.” It’s the honest truth, but in hindsight, Chuuya can admit it looks pretty skewed. Like when he flips through an old sketchbook and winces at his past self's wobbly line art and general lack of creative finesse.

“What do you mean, It wasn’t? I've practically been throwing myself at you.”

“I just-” Chuuya would scratch his head, but his wrists still burn with the feeling of Dazai's phantom grip, so he keeps still. “ I thought you had a thing for your professor?”

Catching Dazai in a moment of surprise is a once in a lifetime event, one of those rare celestial eclipses. And then it happens; a shadow casts across his face, obscurity backlit by a thin wisp of light, which slowly breaks into a prism. “How did you get that idea?” His eyes are frail spectacles bedimmed with stars, entreating and endless. Seemingly. It stops when it stops, though.

“Let’s see. Maybe it’s the way you can't shut up about him, or the sparkles in your eyes when you talk about his research, or the fucking atrocious student-teacher relationship romance novels you’re reading,” Chuuya squares his jaw in lieu of throwing his hands up. In any case, he’s feeling self-righteously sardonic, and he's not afraid of using body language to show it.

“He’s my role model. I admire him, and I want to be more like him,” Dazai shrugs, and the casualness slides off his shoulders. “As for my literary choices… I’m not really getting my *romance needs* met anywhere since there’s only one person I want to do the romance-thing with, and that person has been ignoring me... I was just trying to cope by escaping into fiction.”

Asking the question to a known answer provides the same sort of simple satisfaction as slipping the last button through its loop, and Chuuya can't deny an easy dopamine-hit. “Am I that one person?”

The answer comes in the shape of a kiss, light until it’s hard enough to fizz and make noises bubble from Chuuya’s mouth.

“When you think about it,” Dazai breathes into Chuuya’s mouth, “it’s entirely your fault it has taken us so long to get here. We could have been doing this a long time ago.”

“That doesn’t make sense, how the fuck is it my f-”

“And we could have been doing much more than just kissing.” Dazai shifts back; looks down-up-down-up, peeling layers of clothing off with a laser gaze. Chuuya doesn’t mind being undressed by Dazai’s eyes, he has always felt naked to them.

“Yeah?” Chuuya’s throat tightens around his words, spandex holding him together, too tight, too excited. “What did you have in mind?”

Just one touch is all it takes. Unraveling as Dazai traces a line down to his chest, a delicate brushstroke imbued with all sorts of magnetism. Aggression. Attraction. Chuuya feels it as claws digging into his ribs, and it's the closest thing to a love letter he has ever received.

"I'm the kind of person who likes to put my feelings into action. I like kissing you. I'd like to share my body with you too." Dazai says it with the gravity of a true model, someone who understands the poetry of the body. His fingers gingerly skate around Chuuya's waist, pinching a raw nerve. "What about you?"

"I want the same thing." Chuuya all but spits out with an eager sincerity that's straight out of a paint shaker. Explosive. Colourful.

Dazai dips forward with no degree of modesty, looking ready to steal a kiss – looking greedy.

But it doesn't make a thief out of Dazai because Chuuya offers his mouth freely. He preens and primps; parts his lips, and angles his head, and hoods his eyes, and… gets interrupted by a cold finger booping his nose.

"If you promise to be good, you can have it," Dazai chippers, self-important and close enough to kill with his eyes.

What a lucky coincidence then, that Chuuya lives to prove himself. He nods his understanding, feeling heroic. "I'll be good," he promises, savouring the confident idealism despite knowing the concept of 'goodness' to be a moving border impressed upon the plane of moral consistency in a very haphazard fashion.

But sometimes good things happen before Chuuya has the chance to overthink them: Dazai falls without catching himself before impact, plunging into Chuuya's mouth, a sodium storm in a glass of water and the taste of addiction. There's no gentleness to the way he claims Chuuya's kisses either, only chaos. Too much tongue to be pleasant, but somehow it's perfect. It's very Dazai, and it's in Chuuya's arms, mouth, feelings.

It's easy to get lost in, but disorientation is familiar territory (even if touching Dazai in a way that crosses platonic boundaries isn't), so Chuuya doesn't fight the impulse to stumble further and further into a dream come true. He nibbles at Dazai's chapped lower lip, draws an outline around his body with shaking hands for ink.

He paws at the collar of Dazai's shirt, useless as a broken seam ripper.

It’s embarrassingly desperate, and Chuuya is the very opposite of embarrassing, so the situation is tailored for his penchant for absurdist humour. He laughs again, and Dazai retaliates with teeth, soothing the sting with his tongue.

Someone, probably Chuuya, whines an off-pitch serenade, and then one of Dazai’s hands cups the back of his neck, holding him in place to deepen the kiss.

And deep it goes, pushing Chuuya further into the sofa cushions, making him curl his toes and dip his head back. Falling, falling, falling. He licks into Dazai’s mouth, rocking up against him.

“Mmmm, exactly like that,” Dazai purrs, “you’re being very good.” His body is golden cellophane, wrapping all around Chuuya.

Everywhere they touch glows, and they touch everywhere, so Chuuya is blinded. Energised by fever, he coasts a hand along the back of Dazai’s thigh. He digs his nails in and swallows the delighted gasp Dazai awards him for the move.

They’re still separated by entirely too many layers of clothing, and it’s starting to feel increasingly unacceptable, the urge to tear seams, hems, and trims to confetti gnawing at Chuuya’s slipping control.

Dazai must feel some similar kind of way as he yanks at the plackets of Chuuya’s shirt (which is technically Dazai’s shirt, but Dazai looks at it with venom that says he regrets the day he bought it) – eager, but he doesn't seem to be able to muster the fine motor skills required to undo the buttons.

So Chuuya helps; slips the shirt over his head and throws it aside, sparing just a second of self-reproach for not folding it properly – clothes deserve better than crumples and creases.

Dazai runs his hands over Chuuya’s pecks, hotter than flat irons. His lips are shiny and wet – Chuuya even flatters himself thinking there’s a bit of drool at the corner of his mouth.

It’s a destabilising ego boost, so he grips Dazai’s waist, one hand sliding over the curve of his lower back, hooking on the waistband of his trousers. A brave move for a brave person, so Chuuya honestly can’t comprehend what his hands are trembling for.

Of course, Dazai’s mouth pulls into a smirk, never missing an opportunity to put on a show of superior unflappability. “Chuuya

wants me so bad," he says with the hollow resonance of a revelation – like it's something he discovered all on his own, that dirty little plagiarist.

"Yes, I know. I said it first, actually." Chuuya huffs.

Hair falls into Dazai's face as he dips forward to attach himself to Chuuya's jawline. His laughter is pearls on a string clattering against each other, and his kisses adorn Chuuya with a necklace of lovebites.

Chuuya feels sparkly and pretty and ready for a magazine cover. He pinches Dazai's waist, just because. Dazai yelps and leaves the echoes of it ringing as he scoots forward, swivelling his hips.

Slick heat shoots up Chuuya's spine and his body goes taut, a cord about to break. He's so easy for Dazai.

But then Dazai stops. There's a moment where he just observes. Then he wiggles, settling right on top of Chuuya's poor cock, trapped beneath too many layers of sexual tension.

"No, but you *really* are obsessed with me." Dazai lifts up on hands and knees to hover over Chuuya, casting the shadow of silent appraisal. The calculating expression he wears is as flattering as it's foreboding.

Never breaking eye contact, he sketches a line from Chuuya's navel down, down, down… and then, without leaving as much as a perfunctory pause for processing or the slightest veneer of decorum, he palms Chuuya through his pants and cheers. "I knew you had a big dick. I just *knew* it."

There's a lot Chuuya could say to that, but he finds his tendency to blurt out every half-formed thought in his head trapped behind zipped lips.

Luckily, Dazai takes over; raises a finger the way he does when he has some genius insight he wishes to share. He pokes Chuuya's cheek. Once. Twice. As if testing the squishiness.

It's not the sort of act that fits Chuuya's idea of foreplay, and being on the receiving end of it doesn't make him feel particularly sexy, but it fits some luxury brand of intimacy nonetheless, so he basks in the craftsmanship.

"You're all pink. So pretty," Dazai comments and presses his other hand firmly against Chuuya's cock, rubbing the outline from tip to

base and back again.

All of Chuuya's reality reduces to that friction. All the sensations collide and whizz up his spine, making his back arch. All the words that rattle around in his head turn into heavy breaths.

And breathing only gets harder from there because Dazai takes up the fight against his sweater, wrestling it over his head, revealing that underneath the innocent overwear, he's dressed to kill.

Black silk. Lace-edged straps hugging his shoulders. Scalloped edges tipping the low-cut V that falls over his chest. A camisole that holds his body as tenderly as a lover.

Chuuya dies a little – by the hand of beauty, of longing – but also of *jealousy* because: "that's not one of my designs."

"Chuuya's designs aren't on the market yet," Dazai points out, with a smug lilt that says he knows how to spool Chuuya's feelings around his finger. He leans in, whispering conspiratorially. "But I did consider stealing one of the samples during the last fitting."

"Of course you did," Chuuya says into the charged space between them. "But technically, it wouldn't be stealing. It's already yours. All of my designs were made with you in mind."

Dazai opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again. Silence gushes out of him.

"Actually," Chuuya puffs his chest as much as he can in the reclined position, feeling artistic and self-important enough to add, "you're my muse."

"Ah," Dazai lifts a hand to fan his face, wrist loose. He finds his voice again, the annoying chipper one. "How flattering. I look so magical in lingerie that it makes you want to create a whole collection just for me?"

"Yeah…" Chuuya trails off, leaving plenty of room for himself to elaborate in case he finds the eloquence to explain the creative process in more detail – to fit the big feelings with the big names into his mouth.

After a few moments of searching his vocabulary and finding only unoriginal platitudes that are entirely too tacky, he decides to speak with his hands instead. He paints a line up Dazai's arm with a finger,

twirling around a lace strap.

It isn’t the first time Chuuya sees Dazai in this soft state of silk-swathed undress. But it may as well be because this time he’s allowed to take off his glasses of professionalism and really *look* at Dazai. All pleasure and no business.

Chuuya's teeth itch, and he sort of wants to chew the stupidly pretty camisole to pieces. He finds the impulse-control to be a bit more poised than that, though; explores with nimble touches.

And what he finds is skin softer than satin, proportions slung in golden ratios, padded curves – Dazai’s body is a garment custom-made to match his beautiful personality.

Ribbons of bandages coil around him as decorative trim. A daring fashion choice, but also evidence of the little cracks in the seam of his starched and pressed masquerade of detachment – a ‘please handle with care’ label.

Beautiful. Complicated. It's all tangled up, and Chuuya might be a little worried he’ll accidentally pull the wrong string during the undressing process.

Dazai must notice Chuuya’s hesitation. At least he wears a knowing smile. “Relax. It’s just me.”

But relaxing is hard work, and Dazai isn't just Dazai – he’s everything.

Still, the reassuring gesture betrays too sweet a concern over Chuuya’s welfare for him to comment on its counterproductivity. Reaching up, he traces Dazai’s collarbone. A shiver passes between them, and Chuuya wants to swallow it, so he shifts his grip to the back of Dazai’s neck. He doesn't tug, but Dazai slopes into the non-existent pressure nonetheless, lips parting on a sloppy hick-up as he melts and meets Chuuya halfway.

For all Chuuya intends to keep it classy, the muffled noise Dazai makes when their lips part against each other is too enticing not to breathe in with full lungs. It’s the taste of a million sweet marshmallows. It’s the crackling fragility of ripped organza.

There are hands in Chuuya’s hair, tugging at his sanity, splitting his composure apart. And all he can do is lay there in a state of incandescent heat, sizzling. He dips his head back with a moan that’s even louder than the static noise in his ears, and Dazai catches him

with teeth and tongue, holding him tighter than a corset.

But corsets can only be tightened so much before something breaks. Nails dig into Chuuya's side, and the sweet pain circles his reflexes, making his hips buck.

"*Yes*," Dazai's voice and hips jounce. Delicious pressure where Chuuya needs it the most.

A shared breath, a shared rhythm. Swaying, shaking, shivering. And *falling*.

"Oof." Dazai's back hits the floor, punching the breath out of him, turning it into a gentle puff against Chuuya's lips.

It's the softest landing Chuuya has ever experienced. He sweeps the hair out of Dazai's face, revealing a miffed expression behind the curtain of bangs.

"Are you okay?" Chuuya asks, muffling his amusement with a well-placed cough.

"Chuuya is heavy," Dazai whines.

It's more of a call to action than an answer, so Chuuya leaps to his feet and holds out a hand to offer Dazai a pull-up.

Always one for utterly unnecessary displays of dramatics, Dazai ignores the show of chivalry and struggles to his feet on his own. He brushes himself off in one dignified motion, nose in the air. "Bedroom?"

It's all the directions Chuuya needs. He has already speed-walked hallways across the room with his heart in his throat and excitement on his heels, when Dazai grips his wrist, sliding their hands together and intertwining their fingers. They're a hand-in-glove fit.

♡♡♡

This time, Chuuya is the one cushioning the fall, back hitting the mattress as a soft blanket of *Dazai* spreads out on top of him.

It's a soft caress of a comedown, and Chuuya wants to swathe himself in it. So he does – buries his face in Dazai's nape, breathing in.

"Be still," Dazai orders, with enough edge to pull Chuuya out of the autopilot mode that has him squirming in the sheets, creating a fabric-

shifting nightmare with himself as the badly cut pattern piece that just won't fit.

Every fibre of Chuuya's being screams at him to go, go, go. But while response inhibition isn't his speciality, and while his personality lends itself to deference about as well as stilettos lend themselves to hiking, he finds himself very motivated to follow orders. So he smooths the furrows from his expression; relaxes his facial muscles into something suitably mellow.

The contrived facade of calm doesn't do much to distract him from the fact that his balls are about to explode, and he might actually start crying if he doesn't free his dick soon.

Maybe Dazai is a mind reader; at least he sweeps a knowing gaze down Chuuya's body. He clicks his tongue. "Let's get you out of these," he says, toying with the seam of Chuuya trousers, charming them off.

He leans down, catches the zipper between his teeth – then catches Chuuya's eyes – before slowly pulling it down, twice undoing his prize.

The room spins round-and-round-and-round, taking Chuuya for a ride and dropping him off naked under Dazai's gaze.

"Do you even realise-" Dazai starts, a raw-edged sentence, which he finishes off with a head-shake.

"What?"

"Nothing, just being flooded by endogenous opioids and endorphins. So y'konw – feeling a bit woozy." Dazai chirps, overflowing with giddy science nonsense.

Which is just as well because Chuuya doesn't mind acting as a real-life interpreter. "Is that a good thing?"

The answer comes, first as a light press of lips against his shoulder, then a breath of "Yeah. I feel high-" Dazai's voice is a pair of scissors sliding along a ribbon, twisting it into an artful curl, "-that's what you do to me."

It races to Chuuya's head and overlays the incessant noise of thoughts, filtering it into stillness. His awareness drops into his body, carving channels through his arms, twisting inwards to spiral around his core.

It’s violent and glorious.

He feels so real when he feels wanted. And he wants more of what’s real.

“How do you want to do t-hnnngg.” Hot pleasure runs off with Chuuya’s line. He blinks the stars out of his eyes and looks down his body, finding Dazai between his legs.

Dazai has Chuuya’s dick jumping in his fist. He gives it another squeeze. “This okay?” he asks, in a tone entirely too innocent to match the situation.

“Of course,” Chuuya croaks with no hesitation.

From somewhere up his sleeve, Dazai procures a bottle of lube; pours a generous amount into his palm. Then, in a slow rhythm, he starts stroking the length of Chuuya's shaft. It’s as crisp as tulle. It’s an explosion of sequins and glitter. It’s a discombobulated colour scheme that breaks into a prism. “And this,” Dazai keeps up the pace, pumping Chuuya’s cock, dips forward and sticks out his tongue to give the head a little lick, “this okay?”

One word. Just one word. But Chuuya’s skin is too tight, and there’s an invisible choker around his throat, squashing his windpipes.

“Hmm?” Dazai flutters his lashes. Then, on an upstroke, he twists his wrist, stroking a thumb over the tip.

“Yes,” Chuuya hiccups, a sort of miserable noise backlit by neediness.

And then his noises turn to hisses and moans because Dazai, unsurprisingly, knows how to use his clever mouth. He licks a stripe from base to tip, lips of tight spandex dipped in glitter parting around Chuuya’s cock, gleaming like candy.

“Fuck.” Chuuya throws his entire forearm over his face. He can’t look – at least not if he plans to last (and for his ego’s sake, he’d like that) – because Dazai sucking cock is the most beautiful fucking thing, and it’s too much. The self-inflicted sensory deprivation has the unforeseen side effect of strengthening the trip, though, and Chuuya nearly faints when the wet suction around his dick intensifies, making it pulse in Dazai’s mouth, building a card house of pleasure. He jerks his hips into the heat, only to have it taken away.

The whole room reverberates when Dazai lets go with a wet pop, and

Chuuya's lungs collapse on a sharp exhale.

"Don't move," Dazai says, voice a rasp of its usual trill. Then, as though to underscore the point, or put the power of his word to test, or some other unnecessary display of power, he reaches out and tweaks one of Chuuya's nipples.

Out of air and wits, Chuuya bites his lip. The muscles across his chest ripple, but he doesn't move.

"Good." Liquid praise drips from Dazai's mouth, better than any wine. He brushes finger pads down Chuuya's abdomen, tracing an invisible pattern. And then he sucks Chuuya's cock into his mouth again with renewed enthusiasm, cheeks hollowing and eyes fluttering shut, feather lashes fanning his face. Very couture.

Electric currents zap through Chuuya with each delicate bob of Dazai's head. It's electrifying, warmth and undulating swells of pleasure moving through Chuuya, galvanising his skin until he feels numb. He holds on to his stubbornness – the sturdy crinoline of his crumpling composure. Suppressing involuntary twitches is one of the hardest tasks he has ever put his scattered attention to, but he'll burn if that is what it takes; leave a full-body mark on the sheets in his efforts to be *good*.

The pace stumbles over itself with every nod of Dazai's head, accelerating at terminal velocity. No brakes. And all Chuuya can do to keep up is admit he's falling behind. "Dazai?"

"Hmm." Dazai hums a content note. It vibrates in his throat, and it's the sort of frequency that threatens to break anything it touches.

Despite being woven from pure willpower, Chuuya barely manages to hold himself together with loose stitches. He haphazardly reaches out, touching soft hair, twisting his fingers in it. "I'm really cl-"

The moment breaks into split ends. The heat is gone, and all the tension sings a sustained note as Dazai releases Chuuya's dick from his mouth; sits back. "Oh no, you're not. Not yet."

So close and yet so far. Chuuya groans. Delayed gratification is a hard price to chase, but ambition is his lifeblood. He props himself up on his elbows to the view of his own body, lycra-glossy, cock leaking against his stomach. He looks as strung out as he feels.

And he only comes further to falling apart when Dazai shuffles out of

his trousers to reveal his bandaged legs in all their endless glory.

There's so much to have a mental breakdown about. And Chuuya doesn't know where to look any more than he knows how to stop his mouth from dropping.

Always one for unconventional fashion combinations, Dazai has gone for red panties in a very different style from the top he wears, and that shouldn't work, but somehow, he makes it look effortlessly chic. A frilled hem circles his waist like frosting atop a layer cake. His bandages are avant-garde knee socks, leaving the skin between his knees and hip bones exposed.

Garters wrap around his upper thighs, clasping his flesh in a stronghold of lace. They're not attached to anything – they're just there squeezing Dazai's thighs for the love of useless beauty. Their only practical purpose is to drive Chuuya insane, and they do their job.

"Like what you see," Dazai sings from somewhere far away.

Temptation is the only thing Chuuya can't resist, so next thing he knows, he's bent over Dazai, finger hooking in a garter. He stretches it out, lets go – watches spellbound as it snaps back in place.

"Ouch. *Chuuya*?" And then there's pressure against Chuuya's chest in the form of Dazai's foot, pushing him back and away. He purses his lips, gives Dazai a look.

Dazai looks right back. "Did I say you could touch?"

Pins and needles prickle Chuuya's skin, and all the blood in his veins drains into his dick, which twitches excitedly at the reprimand, happy to express its opinion on Chuuya's behalf.

"So." Dazai waves a condom wrapper, rips it open with his teeth – rips the silence right out of Chuuya's mouth. And that's how Chuuya ends up spitting out a hopeful: "I'm clean."

"Me too. What a happy coincidence," Dazai tweeters and throws the condom over his shoulder.

There's a small halt in his perpetual flow of propulsion, where he sucks his lower lip between his teeth. Of all the silly things Dazai says, the things he leaves unspoken are the loudest. So when he shoots out a, "I'm sure you can find a way to keep yourself entertained while I

get ready," smears some lube over his fingers and reaches behind himself with mechanical focus – it's the silent undertones that echo. Soaked in that ambience, Dazai fingers himself, cock straining prettily against his panties, outline visible through the thin fabric.

Polka dots swim in Chuuya's vision, and the tactile desire to get involved pulls at his strings. But Dazai's disinclination to discuss the details of the plan he's enacting turns the whole thing into some cloak and dagger deal. Coded language in the form of glances and veiled instructions.

Chuuya can't follow instructions to save a life, though. He can only go where his muse takes him, so he has to ask: "would you let me help open you up?"

Dazai pauses, sort of abruptly. Then smiles, also sort of abruptly.

While Chuuya isn't liable to fear, it's sort of frightening the way he knows what that smile means without even having to ask. It's telepathy between two miscommunicators and it's wisdom ending in paradox.

"Sure," Dazai finally says, no-big-deal breezy. He shuffles closer, somehow managing to make it look erotic rather than awkward – his grace is fucking devastating. With a flourish, he picks up the bottle of lube and pushes it into Chuuya's hand in a meaningful sort of way, "I plan to distract you while you're at it, though."

It turns out that the distraction Dazai speaks of is a pseudonym for something much sweeter; he crawls into Chuuya's lap and adorns his jawline with kisses and compliments, pressing closer.

So Chuuya holds Dazai tight, or maybe it's Dazai who allows himself to be held. In any case, they're chest-to-chest. Chuuya's eyes flutter shut, and he searches in the darkness, hands drifting down Dazai's side. Holding his breath, Chuuya dips under the thin red barrier of those pretty panties, sliding them over the artistic curve of Dazai's ass. He finds Dazai's entrance, circling it before prodding a finger inside. To the soundtrack of white-noise rushing in his ears, he starts opening Dazai up. Slow pumps at first, then increasing the pace, increasing the stretch.

The balancing act of restlessness and attention-to-detail Chuuya brings to every task keeps him focused as he angles his jabs and finds the spot that makes Dazai's breath quicken. They're so close. Every time Chuuya shifts, his cock rubs against Dazai's stomach. It's dizzying, but

the hands in his hair and teeth digging into his shoulder stabilise him.

“Ready.” Dazai arches his back and sinks further onto Chuuya’s fingers, moaning prettily. His nails are sharp needles embroidering his name across Chuuya’s skin. It’s so much. “Ready?” Dazai repeats in the shape of a question, but he doesn't wait for an answer – just presses his face into Chuuya’s shoulder (teeth first, absolutely feral).

“Fuck,” Chuuya answers ever so articulately. He falls onto his back, hands glueing flat to the mattress as Dazai lays out on top of him, circling his wrists in a hold that’s a few sizes too small, tight enough to be painted on.

Chuuya is trapped beneath a cage of Dazai, and he’s exactly where he wants to be. For a little eternity, Chuuya gets lost in the moment. But then Dazai shifts back and lines himself up, back straight, shoulders taut. He sinks down on Chuuya’s cock. Slowly. Breathlessly. Thighs trembling as he fills up.

All the tension dissolves from his posture when the final inch is inside him; he relaxes into the stretch with a long sigh, melting onto Chuuya’s cock, tight and hot. He starts rocking in small circles, sliding back and forth, grinding Chuuya’s cock against his inner walls. The pace is languid, Dazai’s movements hyper-controlled as he lifts to his knees and sinks back down, burying Chuuya’s cock to the hilt.

Nails scrape impressionistic marks across Chuuya’s stomach, wracking his flesh with tremors. There’s so much edge to Dazai’s modus operandi, and Chuuya is dangling above it, ready to fall. But far more violent than the push towards the precipice, is the enchanting hypnotism of watching Dazai’s head lull back and forth as he bounces on Chuuya’s cock.

Every single muscle in Chuuya’s body strains against his self-control, amplifying the satisfaction of keeping still and riding the waves of pleasure.

Dazai’s breathing becomes increasingly laboured, his cheeks taking on a fashion-colour. For all his well-honed control, his body twitches and shivers, telegraphing his desperation. “Chuuya,” he says, voice overlaid with unarticulated meaning and a trance-like beat. He leans in for a kiss, and he gets everything he wants with bruising tenderness. He hums into Chuuya’s mouth, grinding against him; movements small, feelings big. “Chuuya,” he repeats hotly. “You’re so good for me.”

The breath stutters out of Chuuya's mouth, shattering on a satisfied sigh. There's creative self-actualization, there's happiness, there's enlightenment – and then there's 'being good for Dazai' – the ultimate elevation. Chuuya basks and shimmers with accomplishment.

"Will you…" Dazai trails off, shaking his head. "I need…" He leaves the request between the lines for Chuuya to read into.

Chuuya skims a hand down Dazai's body, splays out along bare skin between hips and thighs, plays with garters and fraying bandages. In a swift move, he flips them around, turning the world on its axis. And then Chuuya's on top. "I know what you need," he says, leaning over Dazai and brushing their lips together, whispering into the kiss. "I'll give it to you. I'll make it so good. I promise."

In place of a proper answer, Dazai turns his head and gives a sideways hooded look. It's quite clearly a calculated manoeuvre, but it works none the same – goes straight to Chuuya's dick.

"Okay?" Chuuya asks although he knows the answer. He guides his cock to Dazai's entrance; waits for formal approval, quivering.

A thin "please" leaves Dazai's mouth. It's all it takes to cut the string, and Chuuya plunges all the way in, eyes rolling back.

Dazai exhales sharply. A hissed-out blissed-out, "yes." He cants his hips, creating a golden angle that bids Chuuya's cock deeper inside.

A kiss to Dazai's collarbone because it glistens as invitingly as a dessert, and then Chuuya starts moving. He works up to a rhythm that's just maddening, pushing into Dazai again and again, letting the tight heat devour him.

Beneath him, Dazai crumples, strangled sobs and muted moans tumbling from his lips. He paints a beautiful picture – a masterpiece worth billions of yen: Fucked stupid and embellished with the evidence of Chuuya's impact. Chuuya could come like this – just from looking at Dazai – but he doesn't want to. He wants to come with his cock buried so thoroughly in Dazai that it touches his heart. So he snakes an arm under Dazai's back and pulls him closer. The shift in angle draws Chuuya impossibly deeper, and he dissolves in sweet sensation.

"Chu-" Dazai whispers, jolting his hips. With every thrust, he appears to disintegrate further. He melts into the mattress, knees falling to the sides, splaying himself open.

What a privilege, getting to see Dazai so genuinely affected – twitching, blindly flexing his fingers around the ghost of performativity. It's a declaration of trust, and it's a badge of pride Chuuya will wear with honour.

Dazai's mouth opens and closes to the sound of nothing, and Chuuya wants everything. Wants all of Dazai – all the things he says and doesn't say.

So Chuuya dips forward, slides his tongue into Dazai's mouth, swallows up every gasp. He stops holding back – accepts that he's helpless against pleasure, helpless against Dazai – he laces their fingers together and really *moves*. He snaps his hips, *hard*; pounds into Dazai's heat again and again.

Beneath them, the bed creaks. It's the sound of abandon, and it's a beguiling backdrop to the string of gems, which fall from Dazai's mouth – a combination of muted gasps, breathy renditions of Chuuya's name, and total nonsense – words whirring, comforting and repetitive. Chuuya goes along for the ride, as calm as the foot on an old sewing machine treadle, rocking back and forth.

Pressure builds, pooling in Chuuya's stomach, pushing him to his limit. He presses his palms flat against the backs of Dazai's thighs; bends them towards his chest, drawing a gasp. Every drop of pleasure Chuuya has ever experienced is second-hand to this. He's being turned inside out like a pocket, revealing and releasing all the things he carries around to ground himself. Faster. Harder. He slams into Dazai to a looped refrain of soundless sobs.

Heat rushes from Chuuya's core and to his fingertips, which dig into the supple flesh of Dazai's thighs, leaving a personal signature. The idea of branding Dazai the same way he'd sew a tag into one of his designs is too charming, and Chuuya's lost to the glue of it. His hips stutter, and he pulls Dazai down to meet his uneven thrusts.

And then he's gone. Pleasure exists somewhere at the edge of him. It spikes. Pins and needles prickle the corners of consciousness, but through the haze, he cuts a star-print pattern and meets Dazai's eyes behind misty glasses.

They merge. The common thread that runs through the fabric of their experience cuts. Chuuya watches white ribbons paint Dazai's stomach, and then everything turns black for an extended moment.

A calm bliss consumes the sharp walls of the world, and Chuuya

floats.

He returns to fingers flexing against his nape, scratching – the feeling of Dazai shifting beneath him. Chuuya rolls to the side, props himself up on a shoulder, watches Dazai watching him with a sense of mirrored recognition. “Hi.”

“Hi,” Dazai croaks back. He’s gloriously messed up. Hair sticking out every which direction, cheeks flushed. The spaghetti straps of his camisole hang off his shoulders. Delicately, he slithers it all the way off and uses it to clean himself – then not as gently as he could – he wipes Chuuya’s chest and still-twitching dick.

He finishes with a squeeze to Chuuya’s bicep.

“Don’t you think- ”Chuuya gestures to the shape of his body. “You could fit in. Like, right here.”

The invitation receives a sweet response, Dazai shuffling closer, draping himself over Chuuya; heavy like velvet, weightless like silk.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and sticking with me! You're all beautiful and magical and wonderful. But at last, we're done!
Thank you for all your comments and kudos – it really does mean the world to me.
Also, I have a thing for Dazai calling everyone and their dog “darling” but always calling Chuuya by his name. Just had to share.
Love you guys! See you soon!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!